

**STAR
WARSTM**



Jedi Apprentice Omnibus

Volume One

Dave Wolverton

Jude Watson



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Jedi Apprentice: The Rising Force
Jedi Apprentice: The Dark Rival
Jedi Apprentice: The Hidden Past
Jedi Apprentice: The Mark of the Crown
Jedi Apprentice: The Defenders of the Dead
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Includes

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Book One

The Rising Force

Chapter One

The blade of the lightsaber hissed through the air. Obi-Wan Kenobi could not see its red gleam through the blindfold pressing on his eyes. He used the Force to know precisely when to duck.

The searing heat of his opponent's lightsaber blade slashed overhead, nearly burning him. The air smelled like lightning.

"Good!" Yoda called from the sidelines of the room. "Let go. Let your feelings guide you."

The words of encouragement spurred Obi-Wan on. Because he was tall and strong for a twelve-year-old, many assumed that he'd have the advantage in battle.

But strength and size counted for nothing where agility and speed were needed. Nor did they have any effect on the Force that he had not yet mastered.

Obi-Wan listened intently for the sound of his foe's lightsaber, for his breathing, for the scrape of a shoe against the floor. Such sounds echoed loudly in the small, high-ceilinged chamber.

A random jumble of blocks on the floor added another element to the exercise. He had to use the Force to sense those, too. With such uneven ground, it was easy to lose his footing.

Behind Obi-Wan, Yoda warned, "Keep your guard up."

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Obi-Wan obediently raised his weapon and rolled to his right as his opponent's blade slammed down into the floor beside him. He took a small leap back, clearing a pile of blocks. Obi-Wan heard the sing of the lightsaber as his foe attempted a hasty strike motivated by irritation and fatigue. Good.

Sweat trickled underneath the blindfold, making his eyes sting. Obi-Wan blocked it out, along with his pleasure at his opponent's clumsiness. He could imagine himself a full Jedi Knight, battling a space pirate... a Togorian with fangs as long as Obi-Wan's fingers. In his mind, Obi-Wan saw the armored creature glare at him through eyes that were mere green slits. Its claws could easily shred a Human.

The vision energized him, helped him let go of his fears. In seconds, his every muscle was tuned to the Force. It moved through him, giving him the agility and speed that he needed.

Obi-Wan swung his blade up to block the next blow. The attacker's lightsaber hummed and whirled down. Obi-Wan leaped high, somersaulting over his attacker's head, and thrust his lightsaber down where the Togorian's heart would be.

"Aargh!" The other student howled in surprised rage as Obi-Wan's hot blade struck his neck. If Obi-Wan had been using a Jedi Knight's lightsaber, it would have been a killing blow. But apprentices in the Jedi Temple used training sabers set at low power. The touch of the blade only gave a searing kiss, one that the healers might need to tend.

"That was a lucky blow!" the wounded apprentice shouted.

Until that moment, Obi-Wan had not known who he was fighting. He'd been led into the room blindfolded. Now he recognized the voice: Bruck Chun. Like Obi-Wan, Bruck was one of the oldest apprentices in the Jedi Temple. Like Obi-Wan, Bruck hoped to be a Jedi Knight.

"Bruck," Yoda called calmly. "Leave your blindfold on. A Jedi needs not his eyes to see."

But Obi-Wan heard the boy's blindfold slap to the ground. Bruck's voice was choked with fury. "You clumsy oaf!"

STAR WARS: The Rising Force

“Calm yourself, you will!” Yoda warned Bruck in a sharp tone he rarely used.

Every student at the Jedi Temple had his or her weaknesses. Obi-Wan knew his own too well. Every day, he had to struggle to control his anger and his fear. The Temple was a test of character as much as skill.

Bruck struggled with his own simmering anger that could quickly ignite into hot rage. He usually kept it well under control, so that only other initiates had glimpsed it.

Bruck also held grudges. A year ago, Obi-Wan had stumbled in a Temple corridor, tripping Bruck, who had fallen. It had been an accident, caused by legs and feet that were growing too fast on both boys, but Bruck felt sure that Obi-Wan had done it on purpose. Bruck’s dignity was very important to him. The laughter of the other students had goaded him. He’d called Obi-Wan an oaf then—Oafy-Wan.

The name had stuck.

The worst thing was that it was true. Often, Obi-Wan felt that his body was growing too fast. He couldn’t seem to catch up with his long legs and large feet. A Jedi should feel comfortable in his body, but Obi-Wan felt awkward. Only when the Force was moving through him did he feel graceful or sure.

“Come on, Oafy,” Bruck taunted. “See if you can hit me again! One last time, before they throw you out of the Temple!”

“Bruck, enough!” Yoda said. “Learn to lose as well as win, a Jedi must. Go to your room, you will.”

Obi-Wan tried not to feel the sting of Bruck’s words. In four weeks he’d turn thirteen and would have to leave the Temple. Taunts like Bruck’s were becoming more and more frequent as his birthday drew nearer. If he did not become a Padawan within the next four weeks, he’d be too old. He’d been listening for rumors intently, and had found that no Jedi was scheduled to come in search of a Padawan before it was too late. He was afraid that he’d never become a Jedi Knight. That fear angered him. Enough for him to make a foolish boast.

Dave Wolverton

“You don’t have to send him away, Master Yoda,” he said. “I’m not afraid to fight *him* without his blindfold.”

Color blazed in Bruck’s cheeks, and his ice-blue eyes narrowed. Yoda merely nodded, taking in Obi-Wan’s words. The truth was that Obi-Wan was just as exhausted as Bruck. He hoped Yoda would send both of them to their rooms instead of allowing them to fight again.

After a long moment, however, Yoda said, “All right. Continue. Much to learn, you have. Use the blindfolds, you must.”

Obi-Wan turned and bowed to Yoda, accepting the order. He knew that Yoda was fully aware of his fatigue. Although he wished that the Master would grant him a reprieve, he accepted the wisdom of all of Yoda’s decisions, great and small.

Obi-Wan tightened his blindfold. He pushed away his fatigue, willed his muscles to obey. He tried to forget that he was fighting Bruck, or that his chance to become a Jedi Knight was almost past. He concentrated instead on the image of the Togorian pirate, its orange-striped fur covered by black armor.

Obi-Wan could sense the Force flowing around him, within him. He could feel the living Force in Bruck, the dark ripples caused by Bruck’s anger. His impulse was to match that anger with his own. He had to resist it.

Obi-Wan assumed a defensive stance as Bruck lunged. He let the Force guide him as it had done earlier. He blocked the next blow easily. Then he jumped high to avoid another blow and landed behind a pillar. Lightsabers smashed together, sputtered and burned, then whisked apart. The air felt thicker, clogged with the energy of the battle.

For long minutes, the two students fought as if in a graceful dance. Obi-Wan leaped away from every attack and blocked every jarring blow. He did not try to hit Bruck.

Let him see that I’m not clumsy, Obi-Wan thought bitterly. *Let him see that I’m not stupid. Let him see it over and over again.*

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Sweat began to drench Obi-Wan's clothes. His muscles burned. He could hardly breathe fast enough to get the air he needed. But as long as he did not attack in anger, the Force remained strong with him. He tried not to think about the fight. He lost himself in the dance, and soon he felt so weary, he did not think at all.

Bruck fought slower and slower. Soon, Obi-Wan did not even need to leap away from Bruck's weary attacks. He merely blocked them, until finally Bruck gave up.

"Good, Obi-Wan," Yoda called. "Learning you are."

Obi-Wan switched off his lightsaber and hung it on his belt. He used the blindfold to wipe the sweat from his face. Next to him, Bruck was doubled over, panting. He did not look at Obi-Wan.

"You see," Yoda said. "To defeat an enemy, you do not have to kill. Defeat the rage that burns in him, and he is your enemy no longer. Rage the true enemy is."

Obi-Wan understood what Yoda meant. But Bruck's glazed glare told Obi-Wan that he had not defeated his opponent's anger. Nor had he won the boy's respect.

The two boys turned to Yoda and bowed solemnly. A vision of his friend Bant rose in Obi-Wan's head. One of the best things about beating Bruck would be telling her about it.

"Enough for one day," Yoda said. "Tomorrow, a Jedi Knight comes to the Temple seeking a Padawan. Ready for him you must be."

Obi-Wan tried to hide his surprise. Usually, when a Knight came to the Temple in search of a Padawan, rumors beat the arrival by days. That way, if a student wanted to earn the honor of becoming the Knight's Padawan, he or she could prepare mentally and physically.

"Who?" Obi-Wan asked, heart racing. "Who's coming?"

"Seen him before, you have," Yoda said. "Master Qui-Gon Jinn."

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Obi-Wan's hopes rose. Qui-Gon Jinn was a powerful Knight, one of the best. He had been to the Temple before to look at apprentices. Each time, he'd left without taking a new Padawan.

Obi-Wan had heard rumors that Qui-Gon had lost his last Padawan in a tremendous battle, and had vowed never to take another. He came to the Temple every year only because the Council of Masters asked him to. He would spend a few hours watching the pupils, studying them as if looking for something that no one else could see. Then he would leave, empty-handed, to fight the darkness alone.

Obi-Wan felt his hopes dim. Qui-Gon had rejected so many students. What made him think that he would be able to please him?

"He won't want me," Obi-Wan said in defeat. "He's seen me fight before, and he did not choose me then. No one will."

Yoda squinted up at Obi-Wan with wise eyes. "Hummmph! Always in motion the future is. One cannot be sure, but I have sensed... a kinder destiny for you."

Something in Yoda's tone made Obi-Wan wonder. "Will he choose me?" he asked.

"On Qui-Gon that depends—and you," Yoda said. "Come back tomorrow and fight for him with the Force as your ally. Perhaps accept you he will." Yoda put a comforting hand on his arm. "Either way, it matters not. Leave the Temple soon you shall. But tell you I must, to lose such an apt pupil, I am sorry."

Startled and pleased, Obi-Wan looked at Yoda. The Master's eyes glowed as he blinked at Obi-Wan. A compliment from Yoda was as rare as an expression of regret. That was what made his opinion so highly prized. At that moment, Obi-Wan felt that even if he didn't become a Knight, he had earned Yoda's respect. That was a great gift.

Yoda turned and walked from the training room, the echo of his small feet thumping on the floor. He rounded the doorway into the hall and was gone. The lights powered down automatically and the room grew dusky with shadows.

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Behind Obi-Wan, Bruck began to laugh. “Don’t get your hopes up, Oafy. Yoda is just trying to make you feel better. The Masters won’t be able to push you onto anyone. There are plenty of better candidates than you.”

Obi-Wan stiffened in anger. He felt tempted to point out that Bruck was *not* one of those better candidates. Instead, he headed for the doorway.

He had taken but a single step when something hard hit the back of his head. The sound of the blow against Obi-Wan’s skull echoed through the room. Bruck had thrown a training probe.

As Obi-Wan spun to face Bruck, the boy powered up his lightsaber. Its red light cut through the gloom.

“Ready for another round?” Bruck asked.

Obi-Wan looked at the empty corridor. Yoda was gone. No one would see if he gave Bruck the beating he deserved. Bruck was often cruel, but usually not so brazen. He was deliberately provoking Obi-Wan, trying to get him to lose his temper.

But why? Obi-Wan wondered.

Of course! “You knew all along that Qui-Gon Jinn was coming to search for a Padawan, didn’t you,” Obi-Wan said slowly, as the suspicion hardened into certainty. Since Obi-Wan was the oldest apprentice in the Temple, the Jedi Masters would encourage Qui-Gon to take him—the lost cause. Bruck would not want that to happen.

Bruck laughed. “I made sure you didn’t find out. If I’d had my way, you wouldn’t have found out until he’d left.”

Bruck hoped to become Qui-Gon’s Padawan! And the only way to do it was to make sure that Obi-Wan failed. He’d tried to keep him from preparing, and now he was trying to make him mad. Obi-Wan’s anger, his impatience, had been his downfall often enough in the past. Bruck hoped to fill his mind with rage and despair so that he would not be open to the Force.

Obi-Wan had been raised in the Jedi Temple since he was a baby. He hadn’t seen much of greed or hatred or true evil. The

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Masters shielded the children from such things, to keep them from turning to the dark side of the Force.

Yet now Obi-Wan saw into the heart of ruthlessness. Bruck was plotting to steal his dreams.

He could not let him know how important Qui-Gon's visit was to him. He could not let Bruck know how he'd caused the fear to rise in him, fear that he would never be a Padawan.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Bruck, three months from now, when you turn thirteen, I hope you'll make a great farmer." It was the worst insult that he could muster, to suggest that Bruck's mastery of the Force was so small that he would be fit only for the Agricultural Corps.

Bruck leaped toward him with a snarl, his lightsaber held high. Obi-Wan spun to meet him with a cry on his lips. Flashing blades clashed in a burst of light and buzzing sound as the boys met in the room's center.

Weary as they were, the boys fought until they could hardly move. By the time they crept from the training room, both boys were badly burned and bruised.

Neither had won, and both had lost.

As Obi-Wan headed to his chamber, Bruck took a lift to the upper rooms of the Temple, where the healers practiced their arts. He limped into the medic's chambers, pretending to be more hurt than he was. His clothes were slashed and singed from the practice sabers, and blood ran from his nose.

When the medics saw him, their first question was, "What happened?"

Bruck gasped, "Obi-Wan Kenobi..." and then pretended to faint.

One of the healers looked at him, then said brusquely to a droid, "Go notify the Masters."

Chapter Two

Obi-Wan Kenobi was bandaging his burns in his room when he got the bad news. He was trying to imagine ways to impress Qui-Gon in the morning. He considered ways to improve his fighting skills—anything he might say or do to convince the Knight that he was worthy to become a Jedi's Padawan Learner. But then Docent Vant brought a data pad and showed him his orders.

Suddenly all of his plans and dreams were shattered.

"Here now, it isn't that horrible," Docent Vant said. She was a tall blue-skinned woman with an elegant headtail that twitched nervously.

Obi-Wan stared at the orders in shock. The data pad told him that he would ship out of the Temple in the morning. He needed to pack his bags.

He was to report to the world of Bandomeer—some planet he'd never even heard of, out on the Galactic Rim. There he would join the Agricultural Corps.

"But I don't understand," he said numbly. "I still have four weeks until my birthday."

"I know," Docent Vant said. "But your ship, the *Monument*, leaves tomorrow, with a thousand miners aboard. It can't wait just because you have a birthday."

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In shock, Obi-Wan looked around at his room. Overhead, three model Verpine fighters droned near the ceiling. He'd made them himself. Repulsorlift fields held them aloft, and their running lights flashed purple and green as they hummed about. Miniature insectoid pilots swiveled their heads, as if to look around. Books and charts were piled on his study table. His lightsaber hung in its usual place on the wall. He couldn't imagine leaving here. It was his home. But he would leave it all gladly for the hard life of an apprentice. Not a farmer!

He would never be a Knight now. Bruck had been right, Obi-Wan thought bitterly. Yoda had been trying to make him feel better.

The shock and despair made him feel sick. He raised his gaze to Docent Vant. "I could still be a Jedi Knight."

Docent Vant touched Obi-Wan's hand tenderly. She smiled, revealing her pointed teeth.

She shook her head. "Not everyone is meant to be a warrior. The Republic needs healers and farmers, too. With your Force skills, you will be able to treat sick crops. Your talent will help feed whole worlds."

"But—" Obi-Wan wanted to say that he felt cheated. He deserved four more weeks. "It's a job for rejects, initiates too weak to be Knights. Besides, tomorrow Qui-Gon Jinn will be looking for a Padawan. Master Yoda said that I should fight for him."

Docent Vant shook her head. "That was before the Masters heard of the beating you gave to initiate Bruck. Did you really think that the healers would not tell what you had done?"

In dawning horror, Obi-Wan realized what had happened. Bruck had set the trap, and he had walked straight into it. He wanted to protest, to say that he was innocent. It had been a fair fight. And healers? Surely Bruck had not needed healers—except to back up whatever story he had told.

"This is not the first time that you have let your anger get the best of you," Docent Vant said. "But let us hope that it is the

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last.” She nodded briskly. “Now, try not to look so sad. You will need to pack your bags and say goodbye to your friends tonight. The galaxy is a big place. They will want to see you before you go.”

She left, closing the door softly behind her. Obi-Wan was left alone with only the sound of the model fighters flying overhead.

There was nothing else to do but pack his bags. Obi-Wan felt too devastated and ashamed to say good-bye. Not to Garen Muln or Reeft, or even to his best friend, Bant. They would feel angry and hurt if he left quietly, but he couldn’t face them. His friends would want to know where he was going. Once he told them that he had been ordered to report to the Agricultural Corps, word would get around. He could imagine how some of the others would laugh. There was nothing he could say or do to clear his name.

Because the truth was that if Bruck had set the trap, he had walked into it willingly. Blindly and without thought, perhaps. But it was his own will that led him there. What kind of Jedi would he make if he could fall for the tricks of a bully like Bruck?

Obi-Wan threw himself back on his sleep-couch. He had let Master Yoda down. He had thrown away his one last chance by letting anger cloud his mind. Now his worst fear had come true. After all his years of training, he was not good enough to be a Jedi Knight.

Yoda had always told him that anger and fear drove him too hard, that if he didn’t learn to control them, they would lead him down a path he didn’t want to follow. “Befriend them, you should,” Yoda had advised. “Look them in the eye without blinking. Use faults as your teachers, you should. Then, rule you, they will not. Rule them, you shall.”

Yoda’s wisdom was engraved on his heart. How could he have failed to follow it?

Outside his door, he heard the rest of the initiates prepare for sleep. Goodnights were exchanged, shouted from chamber to

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chamber. Finally, the lights powered down, and the halls were silent.

Obi-Wan felt surrounded by the peaceful energy of the sleeping students. It did not soothe his raging heart. His fellow initiates could rest. They did not have thoughts that tormented them. Obi-Wan tossed and turned, unable to stop imagining the sight of Bruck's triumphant face when he learned of Obi-Wan's fate.

There was a soft knock at his door. Hesitantly, Obi-Wan rose and opened it. Bant stood, not saying a word, just looking at him. The young Calamarian girl wore a green robe that set off her salmon-colored skin. Her clothes smelled moist and salty, for she'd just come from her room, which was always kept as steamy as the air off a warm sea. She was small for her ten years of age, and she watched him steadily with her huge silver eyes.

She took in his bruises and burns, all with an expression that said, *You've been fighting again.* Then she looked past him, to his bags packed on the floor.

"You weren't going to say good-bye?" she asked, blinking back huge tears. "You were just going to leave?"

"I've been assigned to the Agricultural Corps," he said, hoping that she'd understand how humiliating it was for him. "I wanted to say good-bye, but..."

She shook her head. "I heard you are going to a planet called Bandomeer."

So everyone knew already. Obi-Wan nodded dully just as Bant lurched forward to give him a clumsy hug.

"Yes, that's where I'm going," he said. He hugged her. *So, my fate is decided,* he realized in despair. *I will be a farmer.* Because this first good-bye would be followed by others. He couldn't avoid them.

Bant frowned and stepped back. "It will be dangerous. Did they tell you it would be dangerous?"

Obi-Wan shook his head. "It's just the Agricultural Corps. How dangerous could it get?"

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“We are not to know,” Bant said.

“We are to do,” Obi-Wan added softly. It was a phrase they had heard many times from the Masters, when they were asked to do tasks that they could not understand the significance of.

“Miss you, I will,” Bant said, echoing Yoda’s strange way of talking. She blinked back tears.

“So sorry, I am,” Obi-Wan answered. He tried to smile, but could not. In answer. Bant hugged him again swiftly, then hurried away to hide her tears.

Chapter Three

With the help of Jedi healing techniques and the Temple's marvelous ointments, Obi-Wan Kenobi's burns and bruises were healed by morning. But the pain in his heart had not eased. He slept briefly, then rose well before dawn.

He said good-bye to Garen Muln and Reeft, two boys from different sides of the galaxy who had become inseparable in their years in the Jedi Temple.

All through the morning meal, Reeft, a Dresselian with an abnormally wrinkled face, kept saying to everyone at the table, "I don't mean to sound greedy, but may I have your meat?" or "I don't mean to sound greedy, but..." as he looked pointedly at some puff cake or drink. Though Obi-Wan had not had dinner the night before, he shared everything. Bant kindly handed over half her puff cake. With his leathery gray skin and all those wrinkles, the Dresselian could look awfully sad if he did not get everything he wanted to eat.

"It won't be so bad," Garen Muln told Obi-Wan. "At least you're going on an adventure." Garen Muln had always been restless. Yoda had often given him extra stillness exercises.

"And you'll be around food," Reeft added hopefully.

"Who knows where each of us will end up?" Bant added. "The missions to come will be different for each of us."

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“And unexpected,” Garen Muln agreed. “That’s what Yoda says. Not everyone is meant to be an apprentice.”

Obi-Wan nodded. It was good that he’d given Reeft most of his food. He couldn’t eat. He knew his friends were trying to make him feel better. But they still had plenty of chances to become Jedi. That highest honor was what they all wanted, all they worked for. No matter what they said, they all knew his lost chance was a crushing disappointment.

Around him, Obi-Wan heard the swirl of conversations at the other tables. Students looked over at him, then looked away. Most gazes were compassionate, and some tried to cheer him. But he sensed the overwhelming feeling in the room was that everyone was glad that what had happened to Obi-Wan had not happened to them.

At Bruck’s table, the voices were loud and reached their ears. “Always knew he wouldn’t make it,” Bruck’s friend Aalto said loudly. Obi-Wan’s ears burned as he heard Bruck’s high snicker. He turned, and Bruck stared at him, daring him to pick another fight.

“Don’t mind him,” Bant said. “He’s a fool.”

Obi-Wan turned away and finished his meal, just as a huge black Barabel fruit plopped on the table near his tray. Juice from the fruit splattered on Bant and Garen Muln. Obi-Wan glared over at Bruck, who had come halfway across the room to throw it.

“Plant it, Oafy,” Bruck said. “I hear they’ll grow just about anywhere.”

Obi-Wan started to rise from his chair, but Bant put her hand over his and held him down, trying to calm him.

Obi-Wan smiled at Bruck, keeping himself in control. *He wants to anger me*, Obi-Wan knew. *He hopes to anger me. How often in the past have others played me like this, making me lose the chance to become a Padawan?*

Obi-Wan held in his anger, and merely smiled at Bruck. Yet a white-hot fury was building inside him.

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Just then, Reeft muttered, “I don’t mean to sound greedy, but are you going to eat that Barabel fruit?”

Obi-Wan nearly burst out laughing. “Thank you, Bruck,” he said, scraping the fruit off the table and placing it in a cup. “The people of Bandomeer will be honored when I share with them your gift—the gift of one farmer to another.”

In an upper room of the Jedi Temple, Master Yoda argued with the senior members of the Jedi Council. They were meditating in a huge greenhouse, the Room of a Thousand Fountains, where fountains and waterfalls streamed through an emerald forest.

Outside, the surface of Coruscant was hidden by black storm clouds.

“Obi-Wan Kenobi must be allowed to fight before Qui-Gon Jinn this day,” Master Yoda said, just as a bolt of lightning snarled through the clouds below. “I have foreseen it.”

“What?” Senior Councilor Mace Windu asked. He was a strong, dark-skinned man with a shaved head. He studied Yoda with eyes that could pierce like blaster bolts. “What would be the point? Obi-Wan has proven once again that he cannot control his anger or his impatience. And Qui-Gon Jinn is not ready for another impatient Padawan.”

“Agreed,” Yoda said. “Neither Obi-Wan nor Qui-Gon ready are. But the Force may yet bring Master and student together.”

Mace Windu asked, “And what of last night, the beating that Obi-Wan gave to Bruck?”

Yoda waved his hand and, as he did so, a referee droid appeared from behind the bushes.

“Advanced Jedi Training Droid 6, last night the fight you saw,” Yoda prompted.

“Obi-Wan’s heart was beating at sixty-eight beats per minute,” the droid reported. “His torso was faced northeast at twenty-seven degrees, with right hand extended down, clutching his training saber. His body temperature was—”

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Mace Windu sighed. If allowed to continue, the training droid would take an hour just to describe how Obi-Wan had crossed the room.

“Just tell us who provoked the fight,” Mace Windu said. “Who said what, and then what happened?”

The training droid AJTD6 gave an indignant buzz at being curtailed. But after a glower from Mace Windu, it began the story of how Bruck had provoked Obi-Wan into the fight.

At the conclusion, Mace Windu sighed. “So we have one deceitful boy, and one foolish one,” he said. He looked at Master Yoda. “What do you suggest?”

Yoda blinked. “Give both a chance to fail again, we should,” he said.

Chapter Four

Bruck's red lightsaber crackled and hissed as Obi-Wan desperately tried to parry with his own. For the fourth time in less than a day the two boys were locked in combat, grunting and struggling.

Obi-Wan's muscles ached. Sweat drenched his thick tunic. Bruck's toughness surprised him. The boy was fighting desperately, as though his life depended on it. Obi-Wan realized that Bruck was just as afraid of not being chosen as a Jedi apprentice as he was.

But Obi-Wan would match Bruck's toughness with his own, and then push even harder. This was his one last chance.

Bruck's blade hummed as it angled toward Obi-Wan's throat. A touch there would signal a killing blow, and Obi-Wan would lose the bout.

A cry rose up from the crowd seated in the shadows surrounding the battle arena. Masters and students had gathered to watch the fight. Obi-Wan could not see them—he could only hear their shouts and encouragement. Overhead, AJTD6 whisked around, monitoring the match as referee.

"Fool." Bruck growled softly enough so that others could not hear above the cheering. "You should never have agreed to fight me. You can't win."

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Bruck's shocking white hair was tied in a ponytail, and sweat stood out in droplets on his brow. He wore heavily padded black body armor. The odor of burned flesh and singed hair hung heavily in the air. Both warriors had managed to hit one another, but the touches so far had not been firm strikes.

Around the arena, many of the younger initiates cheered, calling out encouragement to Bruck or Obi-Wan. All of them had heard of the fight last night. Obi-Wan heard Bant shout "Courage, Obi-Wan! You're doing well!" Garen Muln whistled through his teeth.

"You mean that *you* can't win!" Obi-Wan told Bruck scornfully as their training lightsabers tangled and sizzled. "Your failure today will signal to everyone that you are not just a loser, but a liar."

The Masters had decided the fight would be without blindfolds. Bruck's face was close, and his eyes glared at Obi-Wan with hate. The moment stretched, extended. In Bruck's eyes Obi-Wan saw a future mapped out for him, a future in which anger ruled him and he began to hate all who opposed him.

Obi-Wan reached out for the Force. He felt it flow around him, but he could not fully grasp it. Here was the boy who stood between him and his dream, who mocked him, who tricked him. He pushed against Bruck and saw the surprise in the boy's eyes as he fell backward.

Obi-Wan took advantage of Bruck's uncertainty to aim a sizzling attack at Bruck's face. Bruck ducked and slashed at Obi-Wan's feet. Obi-Wan leaped high in the air.

As a child, Obi-Wan had learned by fighting older students to avoid flashy attacks that wasted energy. Instead, he'd been trained to fight defensively, to block blows with small movements, or to avoid them.

As Obi-Wan parried Bruck's moves, he felt Qui-Gon Jinn's eyes on him. The Jedi was a rebel and a loner, and Obi-Wan wanted to be seen as a rebel, too.

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Instead of waiting to gauge Bruck's attack strategy, Obi-Wan attacked suddenly and furiously. Bruck tried to block the attacks, but Obi-Wan's lightsaber met Bruck's with stinging power. Bruck nearly dropped his weapon.

Obi-Wan brandished his lightsaber in both hands, swinging brutally. Bruck tried to block a second time, and fell back, sprawling. His lightsaber switched off and went skittering over the uneven floor.

Obi-Wan slammed down, a decisive blow that should have won the bout, but Bruck managed to roll aside and grab his lightsaber. He barely had time to switch it on before Obi-Wan's lightsaber battered down again.

This time, there was no blocking the blow. Bruck's lightsaber was knocked back into him. Obi Wan caught Bruck cleanly between the eyes, burning his hair and scorching his skin.

Bruck cried out in pain as both lightsabers burned him, and Yoda announced, "Enough!"

All around the arena, the initiates shouted and cheered. Bant's eyes were shining, and Reeft's wrinkled face held more creases due to his wide smile.

Obi-Wan backed away, panting. Sweat ran down his arms and face; his muscles ached from exertion. His head swam with dizziness.

Yet he had never tasted such sweet triumph. He glanced into the shadows around the arena, and saw Qui-Gon Jinn watching him. The Jedi Master gave him the briefest nod, then began speaking to Yoda.

I've won, Obi-Wan realized, a thrill rising within him. I beat Bruck soundly. Qui-Gon is impressed.

He tried to keep his rising exhilaration in check. He bowed to Yoda and the rest of the Masters. Then he couldn't resist raising his lightsaber in the air to the cheers of his friends. Obi-Wan grinned and shook the lightsaber at a proud Bant, Reeft, and Garen Muln. Perhaps he'd won more than an important fight. Perhaps he had won the right to become a Padawan.

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The cheers still rang in his ears as he went to the dressing chamber. He showered and changed into a fresh tunic. He was tossing his stained tunic into the laundry container when Qui-Gon Jinn entered the room. He was a big, powerful man, but his footsteps were soundless.

"Who taught you to fight like that?" Qui-Gon asked. The Jedi had rough features, but his was a sensitive, thoughtful face.

"What do you mean?"

"Students in the Temple rarely attack so viciously. They learn to defend, to wear one another down. They conserve their strength. Yet you fought... like a very dangerous man. You left yourself open to attack time and again, and relied upon the other boy to take the defensive stance."

"I wanted to end it quickly," Obi-Wan said. "The Force allowed it."

Qui-Gon studied Obi-Wan for a long moment. "I am not so sure. You cannot always rely upon your enemy to take the defensive stance. Your fighting style is dangerous, too risky."

"You could teach me better," Obi-Wan said evenly. The words invited the Jedi to ask Obi-Wan to be his Padawan.

But Qui-Gon merely bowed his head in thought. "Perhaps I could," he said slowly. The words caused a hope to rise in Obi-Wan. But only a heartbeat later, it was dashed.

"Or perhaps no one could," Qui-Gon continued. "You were angry with the other boy. I sensed anger in both of you."

"That's not why I wanted to win." Obi-Wan held Qui-Gon's gaze steadily, letting him know that he had fought to impress him, to show him how well he could serve him.

Qui-Gon watched Obi-Wan intently for a long moment, still staring at him . . . *through* him. Hope rose in Obi-Wan again. *He'll ask me now*, Obi-Wan thought. *He'll ask me to be his Padawan.*

But Qui-Gon merely said, "In future fights, rein in your anger. A Jedi Knight never exhausts himself when battling a stronger foe. And never expect your enemy to miss an opportunity to do you harm."

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Qui-Gon turned and headed for the door.

Obi-Wan stood still, confused. Qui-Gon was not taking him as his apprentice. He was merely giving out advice, the way the Masters always did.

Obi-Wan couldn't let him walk away. He couldn't see his dream die.

"Wait!" Obi-Wan called out. When Qui-Gon turned, he dropped to one knee as a sign of humility. "If I was wrong, it only means I need the best teacher. Will you take me with you?"

Qui-Gon turned slowly, and eyed the boy. He frowned, deep in thought. At last he murmured, "No."

"Qui-Gon Jinn, I will be thirteen in four weeks," Obi-Wan said. The truth was a desperate gamble, but he had to say it. "You are my last chance to be a Jedi Knight."

Qui-Gon shook his head sadly. "It is better not to train a boy to become a Knight if he has so much anger. There is the risk he will turn to the dark side."

With that, the huge Jedi wheeled and strode for the door, his cape streaming.

Obi-Wan sprang to his feet. "I won't turn," he said with certainty.

But Qui-Gon neither slowed his stride nor turned back. In a moment he was gone, as quickly and silently as he had appeared.

For a long minute, Obi-Wan could only stare at the empty air in shock. At first, he couldn't quite take it in. It was over. His last chance had played out. There was nothing left for him.

His bags were packed, sitting on a bench. He had only to pick them up and take them to the transport that would carry him to the planet Bandomeer.

He lifted his chin. Though he would never become a Knight, he would at least leave the Temple like one. He would not plead. He picked up his bags and headed down the long hallway that led from the battle arena to the landing platform.

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He passed the meditation grotto, the meal room, the classrooms. Places where he had learned, struggled, and triumphed.

It was all home to him. Now he must leave and head for a future he hadn't asked for and did not want.

Obi-Wan walked out the door of the Temple for the last time. He tried to push away his deep sorrow and look to the future as he'd been taught.

But he could not.

Chapter Five

Qui-Gon Jinn could not get the sight of Obi-Wan's despairing face out of his mind. The boy had struggled not to show it, but it was written on his every feature.

Qui-Gon sat quietly in the star map room. Among all the rooms at the Temple, this was his favorite. A velvety blue ceiling curved above him in a dome. The only light came from the stars and planets that surrounded him, pinpricks against the blue in all the glowing colors of the spectrum. He had only to reach out a hand and touch a planet for a hologram to appear, detailing its physical properties, its surrounding satellites, and its form of government.

Knowledge was so easily obtained here. But when it came to the heart, so much was a mystery.

Qui-Gon told himself that he had made the correct decision. The only decision. The boy fought well, but too fiercely. There was danger there.

"The boy is not my responsibility," Qui-Gon said aloud.

"Certain are you?" Yoda asked from behind him.

Qui-Gon turned, startled. "I didn't hear you," he said politely.

Yoda walked farther into the star map room. "A dozen boys fought for you. If you do not choose a Padawan today, the dreams of at least one of those boys will die."

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Sighing, Qui-Gon studied a bright red star. "There will be more boys next year. Perhaps then I will choose a Padawan." In his visits to the Temple, Qui-Gon always valued his time spent with Yoda. Now he wished the Master would go away. He did not want to discuss this. But he knew Yoda would not leave until he had made his point.

"Perhaps," Yoda agreed. "Or perhaps still reluctant, you will be. What of young Obi-Wan? Well he fought."

"He fought... ferociously," Qui-Gon agreed.

"Yes," Yoda said. "Like a boy that I knew long ago—"

"Don't," Qui-Gon interrupted. "Xanatos is gone. I don't want to be reminded."

"Not speaking of that one," Yoda said. "Of *you* I spoke."

Qui-Gon didn't answer. Yoda knew him too well. He could not argue.

"Strong in the Force he is," Yoda remarked.

"And angry and reckless," Qui-Gon said, a trace of irritation beginning to edge his tone. "And likely to turn."

"Not all angry young men to the dark side turn," Yoda said calmly. "Not if a proper teacher they have."

"I will not take him, Master Yoda," Qui-Gon said evenly. He knew Yoda would hear the strong will in his words.

"Very well," Yoda said. "But by chance alone we do not live our lives. If take an apprentice you will not, then, in time, perhaps fate will choose."

"Perhaps," Qui-Gon agreed. He hesitated. "What will happen to the boy?"

"For the Agricultural Corps he will work."

Qui-Gon grunted. "A farmer?" *Such a waste of potential.* "Tell him... that I wish him luck."

"Too late," Yoda said. "On his way to Bandomeer he is."

"Bandomeer?" Qui-Gon asked in surprise.

"Know the place you do?"

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“Know it? The Senate has asked me to go there. I’m leaving now. You knew this, didn’t you?” Qui-Gon eyed the small Master suspiciously.

“Hmmm...” Yoda said. “I knew it not. But more than coincidence this is. Strange are the ways of the Force.”

“But why send the boy to Bandomeer?” Qui-Gon asked. “It’s a brutal world. If the weather doesn’t kill him, the predators will. He’ll need all of his skill just to stay alive—never mind the Agri-Corps!”

“Yes, so the Council thought,” Yoda said. “Good to grow crops Bandomeer may not be. But a good place for a young Jedi to grow it *is*.”

“If he doesn’t get himself killed,” Qui-Gon growled. “You must have more faith in him than I do.”

“Yes my point that is,” Master Yoda said, chuckling. “Listen harder, you must.”

With an exasperated sigh, Qui-Gon returned his attention to the stars.

“Study the stars you may, Qui-Gon,” Yoda said as he left. “They have much to teach you. But will it be what you need to learn?”

Chapter Six

The *Monument* was an old Corellian barge, pocked and scarred from meteor hits. It was shaped like a crate, and attached to the front of it were a dozen cargo boxes it would push to Bandomeer. It was the ugliest, dirtiest ship that Obi-Wan could have imagined.

If the exterior was ugly, the interior was foul. Its battered corridors smelled of miners' dust and the sweaty bodies of many species. Repair ports were left open, so that wires and pressure hoses—the ship's guts—spilled out as if from an open wound.

Everywhere on the *Monument* enormous Hutts slithered about like giant slugs. Whiphids stalked the corridors with their moldy fur and tusks. Tall Arconans with triangular heads and glittering eyes moved in small groups.

Obi-Wan wandered in a daze, his bags in hand. No one had been at the entry port to guide him. No one even seemed to notice him. He realized gloomily that he had left behind the data pad Docent Vant had given him. On it was his room number.

He looked for a crew member, but he could only find miners being transported to Bandomeer. Obi-Wan trudged on with gathering despair. The ship was strange and frightening. It was so different from the hushed, gleaming hallways of the Temple, where he could hear the sound of fountains wherever he walked.

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He knew every corner of the Temple, knew the fastest route to get from the arena, where they practiced tumbling and balance, to the pool, where he would dive from the highest tower....

Obi-Wan's steps grew slower and slower. What was Bant doing now? Was she in class, or a private tutorial? Was she swimming in the pool with Reeft and Garen Muln? If his friends were thinking of him, they would never imagine what a horrible place he had landed in.

Suddenly, a huge Hutt blocked his path. Before Obi-Wan could say a word, the Hutt grabbed him by the throat and threw him against a wall.

"Where do you think you're going, slug?"

"Uh, what?" Obi-Wan asked in surprise. What had he done wrong? He was just trudging down the hall. With a sense of unease, he noticed that two particularly evil-looking Whiphids stood behind the Hutt. "B-Bandomeer," he stammered.

The Hutt studied Obi-Wan as if he were a morsel of food. The creature's huge tongue rolled from its mouth and slid over its gray lips, leaving a trail of slime.

"That's not a ship's uniform you're wearing, and you're not Offworld."

Obi-Wan looked down at his clothes. He wore a loose gray tunic. He suddenly realized that the Hutt in front of him wore a black triangular patch that showed a bright red planet, like an eye. A silver spaceship circling the planet became the iris of the eye. Beneath the logo were the words *Offworld Mining*. The Whiphids wore the same symbol.

"He must be from that other outfit," a Whiphid said.

"Maybe he's a spy," the second Whiphid growled. "What's he got in those bags, you think? Bombs?"

The Hutt pushed his huge, grotesque face close to Obi-Wan's. "Any miner who doesn't work for Offworld is the enemy," he roared, shaking Obi-Wan roughly. "You, slug, are an enemy. And we don't allow the enemy on Off-world turf."

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The Hutt's fingers were like huge slabs of meat. They tightened around Obi-Wan's neck, strangling him. Choking, Obi-Wan dropped his bags and grasped the Hutt's fingers. His lungs burned and the room spun.

Using all his strength, Obi-Wan managed to pry the Hutt's fingers from his throat long enough to gasp a breath. He stared into the cruel, blank eyes of the Hutt, trying to summon his Force powers.

"Leave me alone," Obi-Wan gasped, struggling to breathe. He let the Force carry the command to the Hutt, to batter his will, change his mind. This was not like fighting another student. He sensed a cruelty without conscience. There were no rules here, no Yoda to call off the fight.

"Leave you alone? Why?" the Hutt roared with cruel amusement.

I'm getting off to a good start, Obi-Wan thought despairingly.

The last thing he remembered was the Hutt's fist coming straight at him.

Chapter Seven

Obi-Wan woke on a cot in a warm, well-lit room. His vision was blurry, and his head swam. A medical droid leaned over him, applying flesh glue to his cuts, checking for broken bones.

A young Human woman with reddish-brown hair and green eyes stood across the room, watching him. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to tangle with a Hutt?” she asked.

Obi-Wan tried to shake his head, but even a tiny movement rocked him with pain. He took a long breath. He called on his Jedi training to accept the pain as a signal his body was sending. He had to accept the pain, respect it, not fight it. Then he’d have to ask his body to begin to heal.

Once he centered his mind, the pain seemed to ease. He turned to the woman. “I didn’t seem to have a choice.”

“I know what you mean.” The woman flashed him a brief grin. “Well, you survived. That’s something.” She walked closer to his bedside. “You’re lucky I found you when I did. You’re not one of ours.”

“Ours?” Obi-Wan asked. He squinted at her. She wore an orange worksuit with a green triangle on it.

“We’re the Arcona Mineral Harvest Corporation,” the woman responded. “If you don’t work for us, why did the Offworlders beat you?”

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Obi-Wan tried to shrug, but pain shot through his shoulder. Sometimes it was hard to respect his body's signal. "You tell me. I was only looking for my cabin."

"You're a tough one," the woman said cheerfully. "Not everybody could withstand a pounding by a Hutt. Did you come on board looking for a job? We could use you at Arcona Harvest. I'm Clat'Ha, chief operations manager." She looked young to be running a mining operation—perhaps twenty-five.

"Have a job," Obi-Wan said, trying to feel his mouth with his tongue. He was relieved to feel that all his teeth were still in. "I'm Obi-Wan Kenobi. I'm with the Agricultural Corps."

Clat'Ha's mouth fell open. "You're the young Jedi? The ship's crew has been looking everywhere for you."

He tried to sit up, but Clat'Ha briskly pushed him back. "Stay down. You're not ready to get up yet."

He laid back and Clat'Ha withdrew. "Good luck to you, Obi-Wan Kenobi," she said. "Watch yourself. You've stepped into the middle of a war. You're lucky to be alive. You may not be so lucky next time." She turned to leave, but Obi-Wan touched her hand.

"Wait," he said. "I don't understand. What war? Who's fighting?"

"Offworld's war," Clat'Ha answered. "You must have heard of them."

Obi-Wan shook his head. How could he explain that he'd lived his whole life in the Jedi Temple? He knew more about the ways of the Force than the ways of the universe.

"Offworld is one of the oldest and richest mining companies in the galaxy," Clat'Ha told him. "And they didn't get that way by letting others compete with them. Miners who get in their way tend to die."

"Who's their leader?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No one knows who owns Offworld," Clat'Ha said. "Someone who has been around for centuries, probably. And I'm not even sure that we could prove he or she is responsible

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for the murders. But the leader on the ship going to Bandomeer is a particularly ruthless Hutt by the name of Jemba.”

Obi-Wan repeated the name in his mind. *Jemba*. It might have been Jemba who had beaten him. “Ruthless? In what way?”

Clat’Ha glanced over her shoulder, worried that someone would hear. “Offworld uses the cheapest labor possible. Out on the Rim worlds, in places like Bandomeer, half of Jemba’s workers will be Whiphid slaves. But that’s not the worst,” Clat’Ha said. She hesitated.

“What’s the worst?” Obi-Wan asked.

Clat’Ha’s dark eyes flashed. “About five years ago, Jemba was Offworld’s chieftain on the planet Varristad, where another startup mining firm was also working. Varristad is a small planet, without any air, so the workers all lived in a huge underground dome. Someone or something popped a hole in that dome, instantly destroying the artificial atmosphere. A quarter of a million people were killed. No one was ever able to prove that Jemba did it, but when the other company went bankrupt, he bought the mineral rights for practically nothing. He made a huge profit for Offworld. Now we’ll have to deal with him on Bandomeer.”

Obi-Wan said, “Are you certain it was intentional? Maybe it was an accident.”

Clat’Ha looked unconvinced. “Maybe,” she said. “But accidents follow Jemba the way that stink follows Whiphids—accidents like the one that happened to you. So take care.”

There was something she hadn’t told him. Obi-Wan could sense it—old pain and fear, the desire for revenge. “Who did you know on Varristad?” he asked.

Clat’Ha opened her mouth in surprise. Stubbornly, she shook her head. “No one,” she lied.

He locked eyes with her. “Clat’Ha, we can’t let this continue. The *Monument* isn’t Offworld’s ship! They can’t just go around beating people up.”

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Clat’Ha sighed. “Maybe it isn’t their ship, but Offworld’s miners outnumber the crew thirty to one. The captain won’t be able to do much to protect you. So if I were you, I’d stay off their turf. You’re welcome on our side of the ship anytime.” She headed for the door, then turned and flashed the grin that made her serious face look suddenly young and mischievous. “If you can find it.”

Obi-Wan grinned back. But he still struggled against Clat’Ha’s acceptance of the injustice. He didn’t understand it. He had grown up in a world where disputes were mediated and resolved. No obvious injustice was allowed to stand.

“Clat’Ha, this isn’t right,” he said gravely.

“Why should we have to stay off their side of the ship? Why should you accept that?”

Clat’Ha’s face flushed. “Because I don’t want them on *my* side of the ship! Obi-Wan, listen to me,” she said urgently. “Accidents happen around Jemba. Drilling rigs blow and tunnels collapse and people die. I don’t want his corporate spies and saboteurs on my side of the *Monument*, any more than he would want mine on his. So just accept the way things are. It’s better for everyone.”

She left the room, the door swinging shut behind her. The edges of the door seemed to vibrate strangely. Obi-Wan realized that the heat he felt wasn’t only because he was angry at injustice. His body was on fire. He tried to accept the fire and the pain, but dizziness overcame him. He fell back on his cot, head reeling, while the room spun.

Chapter Eight

Obi-Wan dreamed that he was in the Jedi Temple, walking among the star maps. He reached out and touched the star closest to Bandomeer, one of a pair of giant dull red lights. A hologram appeared, and a Master long dead announced, “Bandomeer: the place where you will die if you’re not careful.”

He woke in the sickbay, with tubes in his arms and an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. For a moment he thought he was still dreaming—Qui-Gon Jinn stood over him. Then the Jedi’s large, cool hand rested on Obi-Wan’s forehead, and Obi-Wan realized he was awake.

“H-how?” Obi-Wan whispered.

Qui-Gon’s hand dropped, and he took a step back. “Don’t try to speak,” he said gently. “You’ve had a bad fever, but I’ve taken care of it. Your wounds turned out to be worse than what the medics could handle.”

“Is it really you?” Obi-Wan asked, struggling to clear his clouded brain.

Qui-Gon smiled. It was the first time Obi-Wan had seen him smile, and he realized that Qui-Gon was not all coolness and judgment. “Yes, it’s really me,” he said.

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“Did you come to look for me?” Obi-Wan asked hopefully. He would not have asked such a blunt question, but he was too weak to puzzle out why the Jedi was here.

Qui-Gon shook his head. “I’m on my way to Bاندومير as well. I’m on a mission for the Galactic Senate. Our missions have nothing to do with each other.”

“Still, we’re together,” Obi-Wan said. “You could show me--”

But Qui-Gon shook his head once again. “No, Obi-Wan, that is not why I’m here. Our destinies lie along different paths. Now is the time for you to get to know the people that you will serve. You must forget about me. You must serve the Jedi in ways other than as a Knight. There is honor in that, too.”

He did not say it cruelly. But Qui-Gon’s words struck Obi-Wan like a blow. It seemed that every time his hopes were raised, they were dashed again.

It was clear to Obi-Wan that even though chance had placed them on the same ship, Qui-Gon wanted nothing to do with him. If the rumors were true, then Obi-Wan, or any initiate Obi-Wan’s age, would only be a painful reminder of the Padawan that Qui-Gon had lost. Obi-Wan could not fight Qui-Gon’s past.

He hid his disappointment and tried to look strong, despite his physical weakness. “I see,” Obi-Wan said.

The door to the sickbay opened a crack. A triangular head appeared in the crack, and glowing green eyes peered at Obi-Wan. As soon as the intruder saw that Obi-Wan had noticed him, the door swished shut.

Obi-Wan turned back to Qui-Gon. “You’re right. My mission should be my first concern. I’ll—” He stopped when the door opened a crack again. Obi-Wan struggled to raise himself on his elbows. “Well, come in!” he called to the intruder.

An Arconan edged into the room. He was slightly shorter than most, with skin that was more green than gray. “We did not mean to disturb—”

“It’s all right,” Obi-Wan said kindly.

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“—but we were told to meet Clat’Ha here. She has a situation she needs to discuss. We heard that a young boy faced a Hutt in a great battle, and survived,” the Arconan said softly. “We wanted to see the great hero. We are sorry to disturb. We will wait outside.” He began to retreat.

Obi-Wan looked over the Arconan’s shoulder before he remembered that Arconans always referred to themselves as “we.” They did not have a sense of an individual self and lived all their lives in colonies.

“I think I’d better set you straight,” Obi-Wan said. “First of all, it wasn’t a great battle. The Hutt just picked me up and strangled me until I passed out. I’m no hero.”

“That you survived at all is a credit,” Qui-Gon observed.

“Exactly.” The Arconan took several steps forward. “The Hutts inspire great terror in us. You showed strength and courage. We admire that. You *are* a hero.”

Obi-Wan looked at Qui-Gon helplessly. He realized that he couldn’t talk the Arconan out of his overblown opinion. Qui-Gon turned away to hide a smile.

“Well, sit down and introduce yourself,” Obi-Wan said. “In this place, I need all the friends I can get.”

“Our name is Si Treemba,” the Arconan said, perching on a chair. “We know yours is Obi-Wan Kenobi. We would be honored to be your friend.”

The door to the sickbay slid open. Clat’Ha strode in with an impatient expression.

“Good, you’re here,” she said to Si Treemba.

Si Treemba scrambled to his feet. “We—” he began, but Clat’Ha cut him off by turning to Qui-Gon.

“We have a problem,” she said crisply. “Someone has been tampering with our equipment. Young Si Treemba here discovered it on a routine inspection. We have three Arconan tunneling machines in stock, and all three have been sabotaged.”

“How so?” Qui-Gon asked.

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Si Treemba stepped forward. “The thermocoms that monitor the tunnelers’ hull temperature have been removed, sir. And the coring couplers have been rigged so that they will not disengage.”

“What does that mean?” Obi-Wan asked.

Qui-Gon thought for a minute. “The Arconan tunnelers are vehicles that drill through rock and soil. As they do, the friction of the hull moving past all that stone makes the vehicle very hot. Without the thermocoms, the cooling system would not work. And with the coring couplers sabotaged, the driver of the tunneler would not be able to shut it off. The machine would simply keep digging until it melted from the heat. Everyone in it would die.”

“Exactly,” Clat’Ha said grimly. “I think that we know who is responsible.”

A booming voice came from the doorway, speaking in Huttese. “*Sie batha ne beechee ta Jemba?*” *Are you talking about me, the Great Jemba?*

The Hutt outside the door was much larger than the one that had beaten Obi-Wan. Hutts can live for hundreds of years, and they never really stop growing—either in size or cunning. This one, Jemba, had a mouth so vast that he could have swallowed three men whole. Jemba’s huge face and eyes filled the doorway.

“Yes,” Qui-Gon said evenly, “we were talking about you, O Great Jemba. Come in—if you can.”

Jemba hunkered down. “It has been many years since I could squeeze through such a small hole, Jedi,” Jemba boomed. “Why don’t you come out here?” He licked his lips.

Qui-Gon walked to the doorway and faced the Hutt. “You have been accused of sabotaging the Arconans’ tunnelers.”

“Aaaagh!” Jemba said, drawing back a pace. He placed a hand over his uppermost heart, a Huttese gesture meant to indicate his innocence. “Never! I swear, Jedi, I did not do it. Do I look like the kind of creature who would sneak around, sabotaging other people’s equipment?”

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Obi-Wan did not believe the Hutt for a moment, but he almost had to laugh at the idea that the enormous Hutt could *sneak* anywhere.

“Of course I don’t believe that you did it, personally, Great One,” Qui-Gon said. “But one of your crew could have, under your direction.”

“Aaaagh! Aaaagh!” Jemba squirmed backward like a giant worm and pounded his hand on his uppermost heart again. “I am hurt by such accusations! I know nothing of this matter. Look into my hearts, Jedi, and you will see that I do not lie! Why does everyone think I am evil, just because I am a Hutt?” Jemba demanded. “I am an honest businessman.”

“Enough of this,” Clat’Ha said in disgust. She strode forward to face Jemba, her hands on her hips, just above the blaster strapped to her left leg. “Of course it was one of your crew!”

“I swear, I know nothing of this matter!” Jemba roared.

Clat’Ha reached for her blaster.

Qui-Gon raised a hand, warning her back.

“Perhaps,” Jemba said, his eyes narrowing craftily, “your people did it to hurt *me*. Your unreasonable hatred for me is well-known. You have already asked the mining guild to have Offworld banned from Bandomeer. Now, by casting suspicion on me and my crew, you hope to have me lawfully removed.”

“I don’t care whether you are removed lawfully or not,” Clat’Ha said furiously. “I just want you gone!”

“Exactly!” Jemba roared. The huge Hutt looked imploringly at Qui-Gon. “You see what I am faced with? How can a Hutt fight such unreasonable hatred?”

“Excuse me, Jemba,” Clat’Ha said in a mock politeness. “But it’s not *unreasonable* to hate a lying, scheming, cowardly murderer.”

The Hutt’s enormous body suddenly puffed in indignation. “We have not even reached Bandomeer,” Jemba said, “and this woman tries to discredit me before the mining guild. Now she

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tries to frame me! Listen to how she talks to me. There is no respect in her voice!”

“I may not respect you, Jemba,” Clat’Ha spat back, “but I certainly didn’t frame you. Your lies are as pathetic as your denials.”

Jemba gave a roar of anger and launched himself at Clat’Ha. He hit the door frame, which began to crack and splinter under the pressure. Si Treemba, terrified, hissed and pressed himself against the wall. Obi-Wan watched in fascination. The Hutt could bring down the entire sickbay!

Clat’Ha drew her blaster, but Qui-Gon stepped in front of her and raised his hand. He locked eyes with the Hutt. Obi-Wan felt the power of the Force fill the room.

“Enough,” Qui-Gon said quietly.

Jemba stopped pushing to get inside the room. The Hutt knew he could not get to Clat’Ha. Qui-Gon glanced at Clat’Ha. Slowly, she lowered her blaster and returned it to the holding device on her leg. Obi-Wan had to admire Qui-Gon’s skill. He felt a pang of regret. There was so much he wished he could learn from the Jedi.

“Now,” Qui-Gon said in a reasonable tone, “let us review the situation. The machines were sabotaged. Yet both of you insist you did not do it. There is nowhere to take this except open warfare.” Qui-Gon looked at each of them in turn. “And that is something that neither of you wish for, I’m sure.”

“Jedi,” Jemba said, “you think yourself to be a fair man. But when Hutts and Humans argue, even the fairest of men join sides against my kind.” The Hutt’s voice boomed in a tone of pure venom. “If it is war that she wants, then war will come. And if you take *her* side, I swear, I will squash you like a pta fruit! Your Jedi status does not protect you!”

Menace hung thick in the air. It was clear that the Hutt meant everything he said. He was willing to kill anyone who stood against him. Obi-Wan had never encountered a creature of such malice.

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It would be so easy to solve the situation, Obi-Wan thought. The Hutt was vulnerable, trapped in the small hallway outside the sickbay. Qui-Gon could draw his lightsaber, lunge forward, and slice the Hutt in half.

But Qui-Gon merely nodded his head graciously. "Thank you for the warning," he said simply.

Of course, Obi-Wan realized. *The warning is a gift.*

Jemba nodded as if satisfied, then slithered down the hall. Clat'Ha let out a long breath.

"Well, that went well," she muttered. She hurried to the door. "I have to warn my people. If this isn't war, it's something close to it." Clat'Ha raced out.

Qui-Gon shook his head sadly. "There is a strong hatred between those two. Neither of them will listen."

"I don't understand," Obi-Wan said. "Why did you let the Hutt go? He may be innocent of the crime of which he has been accused. But I'm sure he's guilty of others."

"Yes, he's guilty," Qui-Gon agreed. "But Clat'Ha can defend herself. As Jedi, we are bound to defend only those who have no other means of defense."

"Still, one of Jemba's crew has to have sabotaged those tunnelers. Why doesn't he try to find out who did it?" Obi-Wan asked.

Qui-Gon answered, "Because if one of Jemba's men did do it, it will make him look bad before the miners' guild. He might be ordered off Bandomeer permanently. He knows that, so he won't point any fingers at his own."

"Ah," Si Treemba said. "And Clat'Ha must feel the same. If anyone learned that one of her workers tried to frame Jemba, the miners' guild would be furious."

"But it shouldn't be hard to find out who really sabotaged the tunnelers," Obi-Wan pointed out excitedly.

Qui-Gon cocked his eyebrow. "This is not your affair," he warned. "If you went looking for those thermocoms, all you would find is trouble. You must stay out of it. And stay away

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from the Offworld side of the ship. You're not fully recovered yet, Obi-Wan."

With that, Qui-Gon turned and strode from the room. Obi-Wan waited for a few seconds. Then he carefully got up from bed.

"But the Jedi said you're not recovered!" Si Treemba cried in concern.

"Si Treemba," Obi-Wan said slowly, "how big are those thermocombs?"

"Not big." Si Treemba held his hands up eight centimeters apart. "Not hard to conceal."

"If we find those thermocombs, then we'll know who did it," Obi-Wan asserted.

"That's true, Obi-Wan," Si Treemba agreed. Then he stopped and made the same odd hissing sound again. "We are sorry. But when you say 'we'—"

"I mean you and me," Obi-Wan said.

"Ah," Si Treemba said. His greenish skin seemed to pale. "We would have to go to the Offworld side of the ship."

"I know," Obi-Wan said quietly. He knew the risk. And Qui-Gon had ordered him not to. But he was not Qui-Gon's apprentice. He was not honor-bound to obey him.

No doubt Qui-Gon thought him unworthy of the task ahead. But Qui-Gon's hesitations paled next to the Jedi principles. Justice must be sought out.

"Si Treemba, Clat'Ha has great courage," Obi-Wan explained. "But Jemba has power on his side. He is ruthless as well as cunning, and he will stop at nothing. Therefore, he has to be stopped. It's as simple—and as difficult—as that. I understand if you don't wish to help. Truly. We will still be friends."

Si Treemba swallowed. "We will follow you, Obi-Wan," he said.

Chapter Nine

Obi-Wan's sense of purpose made him feel strong again. He and Si Treemba decided to search the Arconan half of the *Monument*. It made sense to be able to eliminate the easiest task first.

Obi-Wan and Si Treemba were able to search the kitchens, storage rooms, exercise rooms, and lounges without looking suspicious. Obi-Wan even had Si Treemba lower him down the garbage chutes. They found no sign of the stolen thermocombs.

"We have to search the cabins. Si Treemba," Obi-Wan said, picking a stray piece of garbage from his hair. He sighed. Over four hundred Arconan miners were in those cabins. He couldn't imagine that they would let him just search their rooms.

"That will be no problem, Obi-Wan," Si Treemba replied.

Obi-Wan had forgotten how Arconans think. They had no words for *me* or *mine*. So Si Treemba wandered from cabin to cabin, searching each bunk and storage compartment. A dozen times, Arconans asked, "What are we doing?"

Each time, Si Treemba would merely answer, "We are looking for something that was lost."

To which the Arconan would ask, "May we help find it?"

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And Si Treemba would answer, “We need no assistance.” Then Si Treemba and Obi-Wan would search the room and leave.

But not all the workers for Arcona Mineral Harvest were Arconan. Some were short, silver-haired Meerians returning to Bandomeer, some Human. Obi-Wan had to treat these carefully. More than once he found himself using the Force to convince some burly miner to let him search.

It was exhausting work for someone who was still recovering, but Obi-Wan ignored his own pain and weariness. A Jedi did not give into such feelings.

After a long day, Obi-Wan and Si Treemba went to the kitchens for a late meal. Obi-Wan ate a full dinner of roast gorak bird cooked in malla petals from Alderaan. Si ate Arconan fungi covered with *dactyl*, a type of yellow ammonia crystal. The Arconan’s food smelled... well, the fungus wasn’t bad, but the dactyl smelled like poison.

Obi-Wan wrinkled his nose. “How could anyone eat that stuff?”

Si Treemba smiled. His faceted eyes glittered. “Some creatures wonder how Humans can drink water, yet you take delight in it. Dactyl is as necessary to us as water is to you.” Having said that, he took a couple of crunchy yellow stones and popped them in his mouth like candy.

When Obi-Wan reached for some salt, Si Treemba pulled his own plate away in fear.

“Salt increases our need for dactyl a hundredfold,” Si Treemba explained. “It is a very dangerous substance to Arconans.”

Obi-Wan sprinkled the salt on his gorak bird. “We all have our own poisons, I guess,” he said cheerfully, taking a bite.

Si Treemba grinned at him and crunched on his dactyl. It was almost like being back at the Temple eating with Bant or Reeft, Obi-Wan thought. He missed his friends, but he liked Si Treemba more and more as he spent time with him. The

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Arconan had a courage and determination that impressed him. And Obi-Wan was aware that it took nerve for an Arconan to break off from the group and help a stranger.

"You know," Obi-Wan remarked, "there's one thing I don't understand. Jemba puts on a good show. But I sense that he's afraid of Clat'Ha and the Arconans."

Si Treemba swallowed his mouthful of dactyl and fungi. "We think you're right, Obi-Wan. He fears us. Even though it is not our intent, he knows that we will destroy him."

"How is that?" Obi-Wan asked.

"In Offworld Mining, the chiefs and overseers make fortunes, while the common workers make nothing. Many of them are slaves. But at Arcona Mineral Harvest, we have no chieftains, no overseers. Each worker shares in the profits. This did not bother Offworld until Clat'Ha became our chief operations manager. She wants to expand our operations. So she contacts the better workers at Offworld. If they are slaves, she offers to buy them and set them free if they will work for us. If they have signed work contracts, she offers to buy the contracts."

"That sounds fair," Obi-Wan said.

"It *is* fair," Si Treemba agreed. "That is exactly why Jemba fears us. Many good workers wish to join us. As good workers join, only the bad will stay at Offworld."

"I see," Obi-Wan said. "So in a few years, Jemba will have only chiefs, with no one to boss around. He'd hate that."

Si Treemba grinned, then turned serious. "But Jemba has stalled us. He has raised the price on labor contracts and slaves. We can no longer afford to hire Offworld workers."

Obi-Wan was beginning to see that the galaxy was a far more complicated place than he'd realized. The Temple had prepared him for so many things. But they had not prepared him for this. He had known that most worlds in the galaxy had outlawed slavery, and he had assumed that it was rare. But here were hundreds of workers locked in an illegal practice.

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Obi-Wan was horrified at the idea of slavery. Since Offworld had paid good money to buy and train slaves, the company wasn't likely to sell them cheap—or to let them go without a fight. Clat'Ha had been right when she told Obi-Wan that he had stepped into a war. This battle would probably rage through mining camps on hundreds of worlds.

He wanted to race to the other side of the ship, lightsaber in hand, and right every wrong. But that wasn't the way, he knew. He had to find those thermocombs. Exposure was the only way to fight Jemba.

He pushed his plate away. "We've searched everywhere on this side of the ship, Si," he said. "The thermocombs must be in Offworld territory."

The Arconan boy took a deep breath, then released it slowly. "Good. We are pleased."

"Pleased?" Obi-Wan asked. "But now we have to invade Offworld territory. I thought you were terrified of Hutts."

"That we are," Si Treemba agreed. "But still, we are pleased because if the thermocombs are not here, it means that we are innocent. Someone at Offworld Mining is really trying to kill us."

"Yes, I can see how that would be comforting," Obi-Wan teased, though he did understand. The Arconans were hatched from eggs and raised in a huge nest—with hundreds of brothers and sisters growing together at a time. From their youth, they were trained to think of themselves as a group. The thought that any Arconan—any of Si's brothers or sisters—would do something that might hurt or shame the group must have filled the young Arconan with dread.

"So are you ready to search in Hutt territory?" Obi-Wan asked. "We'll have to find a way to sneak over."

Si Treemba pushed away his plate of fungi and dactyl. "As we said before, Obi-Wan, we will follow you."

Obi-Wan grinned. "You might be sorry you said that."

Chapter Ten

Obi-Wan and Si Treemba crawled forward through the air shaft and gazed through a grate down into a dark cabin. A huge Whiphid was lying asleep on a bunk, a ball of sour-smelling fur. The odor of cheap Dresselian beer filled the room.

This cabin looked like a monument to filth, just like all the others Obi-Wan had seen today. The Whiphid wore dirty, half-cured hides from his homeworld of Toola. Piles of painted animal skulls were stacked in every corner, looking like hunting trophies. Worse than that, Obi-Wan could see that Hutts had been bunking in the same room: The floor was littered with the furry parts of half-eaten small animals.

Obi-Wan studied the shadowy scene below for a long minute. The Whiphid was probably drunk. Otherwise he would have been out playing sabacc or some other card game with his friends.

But something *felt* wrong. Maybe the Whip-hid was only faking sleep. It could be a trap.

Obi-Wan tried to peer farther into the room. It looked empty but for the lone Whiphid. He couldn't see the corners of the room, however.

His unease deepened. He could feel dark ripples in the Force, but what did it mean? Evil streamed through this side of the ship

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like poisonous air. He'd searched several rooms already. He'd found illegal weapons—riot guns and biotic grenades. He'd found a small casket filled with credit chips that might have been stolen loot. But he hadn't found any thermocombs.

He studied the Whiphid again. He was lying on his cot. Beneath his head Obi-Wan could see a barely concealed weapon. Among such creatures, sleeping with a blaster was the norm.

Obi-Wan watched the Whiphid breathe. He took shallow breaths, a bit too unevenly for Obi-Wan to be comfortable. If he was asleep at all, he was sleeping lightly.

Too often in the past, Obi-Wan's impatience had gotten him into trouble. This time he decided to trust his instincts.

Carefully, quietly, Obi-Wan scooted past this room. He glanced back behind him in the cramped air duct. Si Treemba was at his heels. The poor Arconan could hardly move his huge triangular head through the shaft.

Then Si Treemba banged his head on the metal duct. It made a small thump. Obi-Wan cringed.

Because Si Treemba's people had evolved in the tunnels of Arcona, his marvelous faceted eyes gave off a faint bioluminescent light. Obviously, Arconans were not animal hunters. Obi-Wan only hoped that as they passed the cabin below, the Whiphid would not glance up and see the Arconan.

Obi-Wan held his breath and moved forward, inching along toward the air vent for the next cabin.

The odor coming from the room ahead was horrible—a mixture of sour fat and greasy hair. Obi-Wan could hear voices, the booming laughter of Hutts, the animal growls of Whiphids.

He brushed aside some dust and peered through the next vent. The cabin was full of Hutts and Whiphids, all crouched around the floor, playing dice.

Si Treemba would never be able to sneak past them. They'd have to back up, as they had done so many times today. Obi-Wan feared they were completely lost.

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Glancing back down the air shaft, Obi-Wan could see Si Treemba cautiously inching toward the previous air shaft. Obi-Wan waved a hand, trying to get the Arconan's attention, when suddenly a blinding flash of light erupted through the shaft, and a deafening boom roared.

Someone had shot a blaster through the vent!

Smoke began to fill the air. They were trapped!

Frantically, Obi-Wan signaled at Si Treemba to hurry toward him. But even as he did, a huge furry paw pushed through the metal grate and grabbed Si Treemba by the throat.

Si Treemba's glittering eyes widened in terror. He let out a choked sound that might have been a call for help. Then he was yanked through the grate. Obi-Wan heard the thump of his body hitting the ground.

Through the vent behind him, Obi-Wan heard a Hutt laugh cruelly. "And you said there were womp rats in the air shaft! I told you I smelled an Arconan!"

Obi-Wan's heart pounded. In seconds he knew that someone would stick his head up through the grill, blaster in hand, looking for more like Si Treemba.

Moving as quickly as he dared, he scooted silently toward a corner twenty meters ahead. He pulled himself around it, sweat streaming down his face. Behind him, he heard the faint sound of Si Treemba screaming. A Whiphid roared in anger. Obi-Wan bit his lip. He wanted to block out the sounds of Si Treemba's screams, but he deserved to hear them. He had gotten the Arconan into this mess.

Through the air shaft, he heard someone growl, "I don't see anyone else up here."

He didn't dare return for Si Treemba. Instead, Obi-Wan crawled forward blindly, turning several corners and moving quickly through the ducts. He had to get help!

At last he stopped, panting. There was no help on this side of the ship.

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Qui-Gon had warned him to stay out of Off-world territory. Now Obi-Wan realized he had to go back. The Hutts and Whiphids would think Si Treemba was a spy. They might try to torture a confession from him. They might even kill him. And they wouldn't wait long.

He had been so foolish! He should have realized how difficult it would be to penetrate this side of the ship. He had led Si Treemba straight into danger. He had taken advantage of Si Treemba's loyalty to him.

Maybe Qui-Gon's hesitation about him had been right all along. Maybe he didn't deserve to be a Jedi.

Obi-Wan wiped the sweat from his eyes with the hem of his tunic. He made sure his light-saber was holstered securely.

Then he turned back to help his friend.

Chapter Eleven

Qui-Gon swung his legs over his sleep-couch. He felt his heart pound in his chest, every muscle on alert. But why?

He had been resting when he had sensed it. It felt as though danger was near, but Qui-Gon was not in danger...

Suddenly, he recognized the feeling. He had experienced it before. Jedi sometimes sense when another Jedi, close to them, is in trouble. At times, they can even see a vague picture of what that trouble might be. Qui-Gon searched his mind, but did not see anything clear. Only haze.

“Obi-Wan,” he murmured. It had to be the boy. Qui-Gon fought against the feeling. It was ridiculous, absurd. The boy was not his Padawan. Why would there be such a strong connection between them?

Yet there it was. Yoda would be pleased.

Qui-Gon groaned. He was not.

Wherever he turned, the boy appeared. He was happy to treat Obi-Wan’s injuries, but he refused to be responsible for his welfare. If the boy had gotten himself into some sort of mess, he would just have to find his own way out of it.

Qui-Gon stretched out on the sleep-couch again. But this time, although he could quiet his body, he could not quiet his mind.

Time seemed to crawl as Obi-Wan desperately searched for Si Treemba. He had to drag himself through the air shaft, sneaking past miner cabins and peering through grates, holding his breath. Grime covered his hands and grit flew into his eyes and mouth as he stirred up years of dust.

At last he found Si Treemba, four floors down near the belly of the ship. A small cabin had been made into a makeshift prison cell. Apparently, the *Monument* had need of a temporary jail during its transport runs. Considering the crowd on this one, Obi-Wan wasn't surprised.

Obi-Wan peered down through the vent. Si Treemba was chained to the wall by one ankle. He lay sprawled on the floor, his arms outstretched. Just out of his reach lay some yellow crystals of dactyl. Only a half-dozen paces away, a Hutt and two Whiphid guards played cards at a massive carved metal table.

The Arconan boy looked beaten and bruised, but more seemed to be wrong with him than a mere beating. His color had gone from a healthy gray-green to a muddy tan. Obi-Wan could see that the life force in the Arconan was weak, and fading. But why? Si Treemba had ingested his dactyl supply before they'd begun the search. Why had he weakened so fast?

The Hutt slithered over to Si Treemba and grinned as he stared down at the captive. Obi-Wan recognized him. It was the Hutt who had beaten him up the day before.

"Ready to talk yet?" the Hutt asked. "Don't you want that dactyl? I could push a few crystals over."

Si Treemba stared at him silently. Even from above, Obi-Wan could see that his friend's contempt for the Hutt could not mask his fear.

The Hutt leaned closer, his huge head bobbing in front of Si Treemba. "What were you doing in our vents? Who sent you to spy on us?"

Weakly, Si Treemba shook his head.

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“You don’t look so good,” the Hutt sneered. “We gave you enough salt in that saline injection to deplete all the dactyl in your body.” He leaned back again and chortled. “So why don’t you tell us what we want to know? It beats dying. Someone was with you. Who was it? Arconans never travel alone.”

Si Treemba shook his head again. His head lolled back, and his cheek hit the floor.

Frustration filled Obi-Wan. He had to do something. He grasped the vent and pulled it out. He shoved himself into the opening, then somersaulted down to the floor. In a heartbeat, his lightsaber was in his hand.

“Do you only pick on the weak and unarmed, Hutt?” he asked.

For a moment, the Hutt was so astonished that he could only blink at Obi-Wan. Then he began to laugh.

“Blast him,” he said offhandedly to the Whiphid guards.

Obi-Wan had counted on the slow reaction time of the Whiphids. They stared at him, their mouths open underneath their tusks.

Obi-Wan sprang forward, slashing at the heavy table. The lightsaber cut through the thick legs easily. With a crash, the table thudded down on the Whiphids. The flimsy stools they had been sitting on collapsed under the weight, pinning them to the floor. They howled in surprise and pain.

“Sorry to break up your game,” Obi-Wan said. Keeping his eye on the surprised Hutt, he reached over to the table and grabbed the key to Si Treemba’s leg cuff. The shackle was an ancient thing of metal, with a simple lock. Obi-Wan tossed the key to Si Treemba.

The Hutt slithered toward him. “So, young Jedi, you have not yet learned your lesson? How dare you defy me, the mighty Grelb!”

“Oh, but I did learn something,” Obi-Wan said. He held the lightsaber in readiness. “You prey on the weak. Now I am prepared to fight you, coward.”

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Grelb eyed the lightsaber with contempt. “With that?”

Obi-Wan glanced behind the Hutt at Si Treemba. The Arconan had managed to free himself. He was quickly eating up all the dactyl on the floor. Already, his color was starting to brighten.

As the Hutt moved toward Obi-Wan, his enormous fists raised, Obi-Wan ducked and rolled in a classic Jedi defense maneuver. As he passed, he delivered a lightsaber blow to the Hutt’s flank. He heard the flesh sizzle.

Grelb roared in fury as he staggered back. His enormous bulk made him clumsy, and he fell onto the table, crushing the Whiphid’s legs even more. They howled in pain and beat against him with their fists.

“Hurry, Si,” Obi-Wan urged. Keeping himself between Grelb and Si Treemba, he waited until the Arconan had reached the door. Then he hurried after him as Grelb tried to struggle to rise. Hutts were powerful, but they were not exactly light on their feet.

“You won’t get away with this, Jedi!” Grelb bellowed. “That Arconan is a spy! This is war!”

Obi-Wan ignored him. He half-dragged Si Treemba down the hallway. Lucky for them, the lower level wasn’t well-trafficked. They were able to reach the Arconan boundary without any more encounters.

As they crossed onto the Arconan side of the ship, Obi-Wan saw two Arconan border guards hurry away. He knew they were going to alert Clat’Ha that the two had returned—and had come from Offworld territory.

That meant, of course, that Qui-Gon would discover that Obi-Wan had disobeyed his order.

Si Treemba stopped. He turned to Obi-Wan, his luminous eyes glittering once again with the same warm light. “We thank you, Obi Wan. We owe our lives to you.”

“You owe your capture to me, too,” Obi-Wan answered ruefully. “I’m sorry, Si Treemba.”

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“But once again your courage saved us,” Si Treemba said, grasping his shoulder.

“What about *your* courage?” Obi-Wan countered. “Think about it, Si Treemba. You were dying, and you still would not betray me. You just faced down a Hutt!”

A slow smile spread over Si Treemba’s face. “So we did,” he said, pleased. “So we did.”

“Don’t get too cocky,” Obi-Wan said with a sigh. “We still have to face Clat’Ha and Qui-Gon. They aren’t going to be happy about this.”

As soon as Obi-Wan Kenobi and Si Treemba were gone, Grelb slithered to Jemba and told him everything.

The great gray Hutt loomed over Grelb, gasping in rage. Jemba was hundreds of years older than Grelb, and also much larger. “So,” Jemba growled, looking around his stateroom in a rage. “I knew it. The Jedi Knight and his young pupil have joined with the Arconans against me!”

“It was inevitable, O Great One,” Grelb said. “They do not like our kind.”

“It’s *your* fault!” Jemba said. “I should chop off your tail for this and have it for dinner.”

Grelb’s hearts began racing in fear, and he immediately coiled his tail up near his body.

Jemba continued, “If you were going to sabotage the tunnelers, you should have waited until we got to Bandomeer.”

Grelb tried to look hurt by the accusation, but Jemba did not fall for it. The huge Hutt slapped Grelb’s face hard enough so that Grelb felt as if his brains had turned to jelly.

After picking himself up off the floor, Grelb said, “You’ve never complained about my methods before!” Theft, sabotage, and murder were Grelb’s methods, but he made sure that Off-world Mining always profited by them.

“But this time there are Jedi around!” Jemba roared.

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“I did not know that the boy was a Jedi when I gave him his first beating,” Grelb apologized. “If I had, he’d be dead by now. I promise, next time—”

Jemba pointed a huge finger at Grelb. “The boy is onto your schemes. There won’t be a next time. Let me handle this!”

“As you please,” Grelb said. He turned away and slithered from the room. As the door hissed closed behind him, Grelb clenched his fists, imagining that he was squeezing the throat of Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Of course there will be a next time, Grelb promised himself.

Chapter Twelve

Obi-Wan considered retiring to his cabin, but he knew he'd rather face Qui-Gon sooner than later. He suggested that Si Treemba get some rest, but the Arconan refused.

"We will face them together," Si Treemba said, drawing himself up to his full height.

They found the Jedi and Clat'Ha in the Arconans' lounge, where the lights were always turned low to simulate night and the music droids softly played Arconan flutes. Few Arconans were in the lounge so late. The few that were there had their eyes closed, and stood as still as statues—the Arconan equivalent of sleep.

Qui-Gon stood at a bar, drinking some bluish juice. Clat'Ha stood near him, an untouched glass of juice sat in front of her on the bar. One look at them and Obi-Wan knew they both were aware of what had happened on the Offworld side of the ship.

"At least you're still in one piece this time," Qui-Gon said, eyeing him coldly. "Well, did you discover anything?"

"No," Obi-Wan admitted. "Si Treemba was captured before we could find the thermo-coms."

"Obi-Wan rescued us," Si Treemba praised. "We were shackled to the floor, and he stood up to Grelb the Hutt by himself—"

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"A man who puts himself in the path of danger deserves to face it alone," Qui-Gon said sternly.

Obviously, Obi-Wan's bravery did not impress him. Si Treemba quieted, shooting a look at Obi-Wan that said *we tried*.

"You deliberately disobeyed my order," Qui-Gon said evenly.

"With respect, I am not under your charge, Qui-Gon Jinn," Obi-Wan said quietly. "As you keep reminding me."

Qui-Gon turned to him and stared for a moment. Obi-Wan couldn't read what was behind that keen blue gaze. At last, he spoke. "Your meddling has only made things worse."

"I made matters worse?" Obi-Wan asked. "What do you mean?"

"Yes, you have," Qui-Gon said. His face remained impassive, his tone neutral. But now Obi-Wan could sense his deep irritation. He had hoped to win the Jedi's respect. Instead, he was looked at as a pest, not even worthy of great anger. "You sneaked into Offworld territory, invaded their privacy, got caught, and had to fight your way out again. They will surely retaliate."

"But it was worth the risk," Obi-Wan tried. "If we had found the thermocoms—"

Clat'Ha interrupted him. "The thermocoms were found an hour ago, hidden in a barrel of lubricant. Whoever dropped them in there didn't expect them to be found."

Obi-Wan's mouth snapped shut. Qui-Gon was right. He had risked the fragile peace on the ship for nothing.

"Can't you see that this isn't about thermocoms?" Qui-Gon said, trying to keep his voice even. "A Jedi must look at the larger picture. The reason for my order was because I wanted tensions to cool. I wanted to engender trust. How can the Offworlders trust the Jedi, if they find you sneaking around their territory? How can—"

The room suddenly shook, and there was a rumbling boom. Qui-Gon's drink went sliding from the bar, and the cup crashed

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to the floor. Si Treemba pitched onto his belly. Warning sirens began to wail.

“What hit us?” Clat’Ha shouted.

But Obi-Wan knew that if they’d collided with another ship, or an asteroid, in hyperspace, it would have torn the ship apart. Distantly, Obi-Wan heard the *whunk whunk whunk* of the ship’s guns firing.

Qui-Gon strode to the window. His hand rested on his lightsaber. “Pirates,” he announced.

Chapter Thirteen

Qui-Gon raced for the bridge, down the main corridors. Obi-Wan, Si Treemba, and Clat’Ha followed at a dead run. All around the ship, Arconans were whining in terror—making the strange hissing sound of their kind. They backed into their rooms and locked their doors.

Through the grates under the floor Qui-Gon could hear the grind of generators charging the ship’s shields. Meanwhile, the steady *whunk whunk* sound continued as blasters fired.

He thought he knew what had happened. Pirates sometimes mined the shipping lanes. When the ship hit a mine, the hyperdrive blew, and the ship would drop back out of hyperspace.

As it did, the pirates would open fire, destroying the ship’s weapons and engines so swiftly that unwary travelers seldom had time to react.

Then the pirates would send boarding parties out to strip anything they could from their victims.

A miner transport like the *Monument* didn’t have much worth stealing, but the pirates wouldn’t know that—not until they’d blown it to pieces and searched through the rubble.

The floor shuddered under the impact of another explosion. As the ship twisted to its side, Qui-Gon rounded a corner. Ahead

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was a transparisteel view port. Through it, he could see five Togorian warships, all shaped like red birds of prey. Two screamed past his port. Green bolts of blaster fire erupted from the warships, slamming into the *Monument*. Metal shrieked in protest. The corridors filled with greasy smoke.

The *Monument's* guns had gone silent. Now, Qui-Gon could see why—the gun turrets had been blown away. Bits of burning slag lit up like glowing stars where the turrets had once stood.

The *Monument* floated dead in space. Though fire alarms sounded, no one on the bridge was shouting orders. Now a Togorian cruiser raced toward the ship.

Qui-Gon stood, watching helplessly as the cruiser approached. There were times when he wished that he was not alone, times when he wished that he had not lost his last Padawan, Xanatos.

“Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon called. Even though he did not fully trust the boy, he didn’t see any other choice. They needed some kind of plan, and they all had to work together if they hoped to survive. “The pirates are getting ready to board,” he said crisply. “I’ll try to stop them. Go to the bridge and see if the crew is alive. If they are not, I want you to pilot this ship out of here.”

Qui-Gon stared hard at the boy. He was asking a lot, he knew. He knew that as a Jedi student, Obi-Wan had flown a few ships in simulation, and most likely piloted some cloud cars around Coruscant. But he’d never piloted a ship like this, and he’d never been in battle.

“I can fight alongside you,” Obi-Wan protested.

Qui-Gon turned and grasped the boy by both elbows. “Listen to me. You must obey this time. Trust my judgment. I can hold back the pirates, but we’ll all die if the ship remains dead in space. Don’t worry about where to go. Just fly anywhere. Once the pirates start boarding, their friends won’t be able to fire on us for fear of killing their leaders. Go now. Fly.”

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Obi-Wan nodded. Qui-Gon could see the uncertainty in the boy's eyes. Qui-Gon wasn't sure if Obi-Wan would be able to pilot the ship, either.

But then again, he wasn't sure he himself could hold off the pirates.

Obi-Wan nodded. "I won't let you down."

Qui-Gon watched as Obi-Wan sprinted toward the bridge with Si Treemba behind him. Suddenly, the boy looked so young....

For half a moment, Qui-Gon was tempted to follow him and leave the pirates to the Whiphids and Arconans. But the miners wouldn't be a match for the Togorians. He would have to trust Obi-Wan.

Qui-Gon heard the distant roar of small blasters. That could mean only one thing: the pirates had already boarded. Though the Arconans were choosing to hide from the battle, the Offworld miners were putting up a fight.

Of course, the pirates would send more than one boarding party. Qui-Gon decided to let the Offworlders protect themselves. He dashed down a side corridor, toward the docking bay. Clat'Ha ran behind him.

He rounded a corner. A huge Togorian pirate stood directly in his path, his eyes flashing like green embers in the dark fur of his face. The Togorian reached out with his enormous claws to rake Qui-Gon.

But Qui-Gon was a Jedi Master. The Force had already warned him. He twisted under the pirate's arms, anticipating the move, and grasped the lightsaber attached to his belt. The blade came up cleanly, slicing the Togorian at the knees. The Togorian roared in pain.

Behind the fallen pirate, more Togorians rounded a corner and ran toward them. Clat'Ha, in a blind panic, pulled her own blaster and opened fire. One Togorian screamed in pain, its huge fangs gaping and showing blood.

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All of the Togorians returned fire with their own blasters. Qui-Gon dodged two bolts, then used his lightsaber to deflect three more.

Clat'Ha dropped low, screaming in rage. She was an able warrior, but they were outnumbered twenty to one. Qui-Gon vowed to do his best to keep her alive.

The door to the bridge was sealed shut, and burning hot. Obi-Wan could feel heat radiating from it as he tried to open it. A fire raged on the other side. Ignoring the pain, he tried to wedge his fingers in the crack to pull it open.

"It's no use," Si Treemba told him. "That's a fire door. It locks if the bridge is burning."

Obi-Wan backed from the door. The bridge must have taken a direct hit from one of the Togorian ships. But a hit from a heavy blaster or a proton torpedo would have done more than just start a fire. Most likely it had punched a hole in the hull.

It would be dangerous to try to open the door. There *might* only be a fire, but it could be worse. All of the air could have escaped from the room.

He remembered the look on Qui-Gon's face as the Jedi Master asked for his help. He couldn't let him down this time.

Carefully, Obi-Wan struggled to calm himself, to use the Force. He could sense the latching mechanism, and it would only take a little effort to move it.

But then what? If he opened it, he could get pulled into space. Or toxic smoke could roil into the corridor and suffocate him, or the fire might spread into the halls.

He didn't have a choice. He focused his attention, and the door slid open.

Immediately, a stiff wind knocked him in the back. The breath left Obi-Wan's lungs, and the ship's air whisked past him, sucked into the vacuum of space. Obi-Wan grabbed the doorframe to keep from getting sucked out. It was all that he could do to hold

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on. Behind him, Si Treemba got a handhold on the edge of a control box.

The bridge had indeed been hit. Air screamed out through a small round hole up above the view port.

“I have to plug the hole!” Obi-Wan shouted to Si Treemba.

But before Obi-Wan could move, Si Treemba dropped to the floor. He crawled across the bridge, reaching for handhold after handhold. Obi-Wan could only hang on to the door frame and watch. He couldn’t stop Si Treemba, and he couldn’t help him.

Si Treemba reached for a spherical compass—the round metal object that served as a backup in case the main nav computer was hit or disabled. Fighting the screaming wind, Si Treemba stumbled to the hull and released the compass near the hole. The vacuum sucked it in, and immediately the rushing air quieted.

“Good work!” Obi-Wan called as he ran to the pilot console. The captain and his copilot were still strapped into their seats, drowsy from loss of air. In another minute, they’d have suffocated. As it was, both men were unconscious. The room felt hot. Blaster fire had ripped through the navigation terminal, and metal slag pooled everywhere. But with so little air in the room, the fires had gone out.

Obi-Wan unbuckled the captain and moved him onto the floor. Then he looked at the control panel. There were so many lights and buttons. For a moment he was stunned, unsure what to do.

He looked up at the view port.

Togorian warships surrounded the *Monument*. A heavy cruiser that had been refitted as a gun ship edged nearer. Its shields had to be down for it to be so close.

A red light blinked insistently on Obi-Wan’s console. In a daze he realized that the forward proton torpedo tubes were loaded and armed. They were standard defensive gear for transports traveling in such a region. His targeting computer was down, but he aimed for the bridge of the gun ship without it.

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His heart pounded. He was afraid of what he had to do. He hoped that Qui-Gon was right, that the pirates wouldn't dare to fire back with their own men aboard. Because if they did fire back, they'd hit with everything they had.

"What are you going to do, Obi-Wan?" Si Treemba asked, holding on to the bridge console.

"Send a message to the Togorians," Obi-Wan answered grimly. "We're not dead yet!"

Reaching across the console, he launched the proton torpedoes.

Blaster fire lit the smoky corridors of the *Monument*, blinding him. Qui-Gon deflected and dodged the bolts.

Dead Togorians were strewn in the hall behind. Live Togorians choked the hall ahead. Their roaring resounded from the walls.

For a moment, he was pinned behind the dead. He wished that he had some backup. But the Offworlders were fighting on another front.

"Where are your Arconans?" he shouted to Clat'Ha. "We could use some help."

"Arconans don't fight!" Clat'Ha shouted back as she snapped a shot at a Togorian. "They probably locked themselves in their rooms!"

"What about Jemba's men?" Qui-Gon asked. "Maybe you should contact them for help!"

"They wouldn't come," Clat'Ha said grimly. "I'm afraid it's you and me, Qui-Gon."

A Togorian pirate captain lunged down the corridor, bursting through the screen of smoke. He was huge, nearly twice as tall as a man. His black body armor was scarred and pitted from a thousand fights. A Human skull dangled from a chain around his neck. His fur was as dark as night, and his green eyes gleamed wickedly.

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He carried a huge vibro-ax in one hand, an energy shield in the other. The pirate's pointed ears were drawn back flat against his skull. He stepped forward to meet it.

"Meet your death, Jedi!" the Togorian pirate roared. "I have hunted your kind before, and I will gnaw your bones tonight!"

Suddenly, Qui-Gon realized that the pirates behind their dark captain were retreating, back toward the hold. There was nowhere to go back there, except another access tunnel. The pirates were probably trying to circle behind him.

Clat'Ha rushed forward and fired her blaster. The Togorian raised his shield against it, deflecting it easily. Then he raised his deadly vibro-ax. With only the slightest touch, the weapon could sever a man's head. Qui-Gon moved forward in one flowing movement, his lightsaber held high.

"No doubt you have killed before," Qui-Gon said softly. "But you shall not be gnawing any bones tonight."

He leaped at the Togorian pirate. The pirate roared and swung his ax.

A blinding flash as bright as a solar flare lit space as the proton torpedoes struck the Togorian gun ship.

Obi-Wan shielded his eyes from the intense light. Si Treemba cried out.

Half of the gun ship disintegrated, hurtling debris into space. A second blast followed the first, as the gun ship's arsenal exploded.

Bits of metal riddled the *Monument*. A huge section of the blown gun ship hurtled into a second Togorian warship.

Obi-Wan didn't plan to wait and see if the pirates would shoot him down. While they recovered, he hit a button, loading more torpedoes into his launch tube.

With the navigation console out, the only way to fly the ship was manually. Obi-Wan grabbed the control, pulled back hard, and hit the thrusters. He heard the harsh sound of metal rending. Had he just ruined the engines?

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Quickly, he consulted the display terminals. He saw the source of the sound. Two Togorian cruisers were latched to his docking bays. By blasting off, Obi-Wan was ripping away from the ships—tearing apart the seals to the doors.

All the air by the docking bays would rush into space.

Qui-Gon had gone to stop the pirates' boarding party.

Obi-Wan gritted his teeth and fervently hoped that only pirates would be swept out into space with the wreckage.

Ahead of him, a Togorian warship opened fire.

The floor lurched under Qui-Gon's feet as he met the pirate captain. The huge Togorian weighed four times as much as a man.

Even under normal circumstances, it would have been all that Qui-Gon could do to fend off the pirate. He tried to catch his footing as he blocked the monster's blow.

The pirate almost fell, but recovered in time to raise the vibro-ax. The blade bit deep into Qui-Gon's right shoulder, driving him to the floor.

Qui-Gon gasped from the searing pain. His shoulder burned as if it were on fire. He tried to lift his arm, but it was useless.

Behind the pirate, Qui-Gon heard the sound of peeling metal. The seals to the hold had ripped apart. Wind howled down the hall as the ship's air screamed away. Qui-Gon saw droplets of his own blood stripped away like rain in a storm.

Debris came hurtling down the hall—blasters and helmets of dead Togorians. They battered the huge Togorian pirate, and he raised his shield, fighting forward, pressing the attack.

Qui-Gon let the wind pull him, so that he slid along the floor toward the vacuum of space, closer to the pirate captain.

If he died, he would take the monster with him.

Heavy blaster fire ripped through the hull of the *Monument*. The Togorian warship had taken aim at the bridge, but with the

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sudden thrust of the huge ship, the blaster bolts had struck the ship behind their mark.

Obi-Wan pushed away the thought of who might have died in that attack. He reversed thrusters.

The warship's next salvo fell short, blasting harmlessly into space. Obi-Wan took half a moment to aim his proton torpedoes, then launched them down the warship's gullet.

As he was sucked toward the space vacuum, Qui-Gon called his lightsaber to his left hand. He aimed a blow at the pirate captain's feet. The Togorian grabbed a handhold and leaped high, evading the cut, then landed directly on Qui-Gon's left arm with his booted feet.

Fighting the pain, Qui-Gon tried to bring up his lightsaber, but the huge Togorian had him pinned. Qui-Gon twisted desperately, but he couldn't get away. With his left arm pinned and his right arm badly wounded Qui-Gon could do little to fight the monster.

The pirate captain roared madly in triumph, and the wind seemed to roar with him. It tore down the corridors like a tornado. Qui-Gon could hardly breathe.

Suddenly the pirate's head disappeared. The huge Togorian hurtled backward, grabbed by the fury of the wind.

Qui-Gon looked up the hall. Clat'Ha crouched on the floor, desperately clinging to the handle of a locker door with one hand, her heavy blaster in the other.

In the heat of the battle, the Togorian pirate had forgotten about the woman.

Down the hall was a bulkhead door that should have closed automatically when the air pressure dropped. But with all the damage to the ship, it was no surprise that it hadn't worked.

Qui-Gon was bleeding badly, and could hardly breathe. Weakly, with the last of his will, he reached out with the Force and moved a bit of debris, touching the controls to the door and

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sliding it closed. As the wind stopped screaming through the ship, everything became deathly silent.

All that Qui-Gon could hear was his own heart beating, and Clat'Ha gasping for air.

The Togorian warship exploded in a burst of light.

Si Treemba worked at the communications console, launching distress beacons. It might take days for a Republic ship to respond, or one could arrive in a matter of seconds. It was impossible to know who would be traveling the space lanes.

Suddenly the Togorian warships peeled away from the *Monument*. Their gun ship and warship were destroyed. Their captain's cruiser and a second boarding vessel had ripped away from the *Monument's* hull, and dead pirates could be seen littering space.

The last of the pirates blasted off into hyper-space, never guessing that they'd been bested by a twelve-year-old boy.

Obi-Wan piloted the *Monument* among the glimmering stars. Warning claxons were ringing everywhere. Monitors showed air leaking from a dozen holes.

"It looks like the ship is falling apart," Obi-Wan said to Si Treemba.

Si Treemba nodded his triangular head worriedly. "We have to land now, Obi-Wan."

"Land where?" Obi-Wan asked, looking ahead at nothing but empty space.

Si Treemba bent over the nav computer. "It's not working," he said.

"I know," Obi-Wan replied. "That's why I'm flying manually. Where are the crew? Why isn't anyone coming to help us?"

"They're probably dealing with the wounded, or maybe they are wounded themselves." Si Treemba peered ahead through the view screen. "Wait! There!"

Obi-Wan could just glimpse the planet ahead, a blue marble the color of water, shot through with the white of clouds.

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“How do we know we can breathe the air?” Obi-Wan asked. The atmosphere might be poison, the planet hostile.

“It has got to be better than breathing in a vacuum,” Si Treemba suggested.

The Arconan’s faceted eyes met Obi-Wan’s. The great ship shuddered, and another warning monitor went off, signaling that air pressure was dropping.

“We don’t think we have a choice,” Si Treemba said softly.

Grelb and his men hurried down the hallways through the Arconan side of the ship. Jemba the Hutt’s miners had fought well against the pirates on their side, but dozens of stout Hurts and Whiphids had died.

There was a good chance that the Arconans would be dead, too. Grelb was hoping to steal some loot from the bodies.

But when he reached the doors to the Arconan hold, he found that the Arconans hadn’t fought at all. Instead, they’d let their pet Jedi protect them.

Grelb glanced around a corner and saw the hated Clat’Ha helping Qui-Gon off the floor. The Jedi had a deep wound in his right shoulder, and his left arm was sore and swollen.

The Hutt smiled, and jerked his head back from the corridor before anyone looked his way.

He whispered to the Whiphids at his back. “Go and tell Jemba; the Arconans are all cowards who dared not come out of their rooms to fight. And their precious Jedi looks as if he’s barely alive. Now is a good time to strike!”

Obi-Wan flew over a watery world from daylight into darkness, to a night lit by five glowing moons that hung in the sky like multicolored stones. Beneath him, enormous creatures flew in great flocks. They were silvery in the moonlight, with long bullet-shaped bodies and powerful wings. They looked like some strange species of flying fish whose wings had evolved to remarkable size. They stretched their wings wide, half-asleep as

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they rode the wind. Some of them looked up at his ship curiously.

Clinging to the manual controls, with the ship bucking and rattling, Obi-Wan could see only ocean in every direction. Then, at last, on the horizon ahead he glimpsed one small rocky island, waves breaking against its shore.

He aimed the ship at the rock, held tight to the controls, and groaned with effort as he tried to slow the ship's fall.

Chapter Fourteen

Dozens of miners had been killed or injured in the attack, so the sickbay was full. Yet few of those injured were Arconans. As Clat’Ha predicted, all of the Arconans but Si Treemba had locked themselves in their rooms at the first sign of danger. Most of the injuries fell to the ship’s crew and to some of Jemba’s miners.

Qui-Gon’s injuries would have been severe for a common man, but the Jedi waited until others were attended to before requesting the medic droid to bandage him in his room. Clat’Ha refused to leave his side, no matter how he urged her to rest.

“Not until I know you’re okay,” she told him steadily.

Obi-Wan had landed the ship only a few meters from the rocky beach. Night hung like a mist over the island. After determining the atmosphere was stable, a dozen of the ship’s crew had gone outside to begin repairing the damage to the hull, and others were checking the surroundings. The silvery dragons were everywhere, riding the night sky, apparently asleep on the wing. Many of them also perched on the island cliffs. It wasn’t safe to stay outside, and the captain said that no one would be allowed to work in the daylight, once the beasts awoke. The ship’s engineer reported that it would take two nights to get the ship running.

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Obi-Wan reached Qui-Gon's cabin just as the medic droid finished spraying a disinfectant bandage over Qui-Gon's ghastly wound. Then he began to glue the wound closed. The pirate chieftain's vibro-ax had slashed Qui-Gon across the back of his shoulders, down to the ribs. Obi-Wan felt dizzy just looking at the wound, but Qui-Gon sat quietly, letting the droid do his work.

"You're lucky to be alive," the medic droid told Qui-Gon. "But your wounds should heal in time. Are you sure you don't want something to ease the pain?"

"No, I'll be fine," Qui-Gon answered, his voice steady. He turned his gaze to Clat'Ha. "Now will you get some rest?"

She nodded wearily. "I'll check back on you later." Clat'Ha left with the medic droid. The door hissed closed behind them.

Qui-Gon eased himself into a chair. Obi-Wan waited for him to speak or acknowledge his presence.

Qui-Gon's blue gaze studied Obi-Wan keenly for a moment. "Obi-Wan, when you accelerated the ship, what thoughts did you have?"

"Thoughts?" Obi-Wan asked doubtfully. "I wasn't thinking about much of anything. I was afraid of the pirates, and I just knew that I had to get away fast." He was too exhausted to care too much about giving a wrong answer. Better to just speak the blunt truth. Qui-Gon would approve of his actions or not. He was tired of trying to please him.

"So you didn't think about the fact that you would tear their ships from the docking bays and kill hundreds of pirates in the process?" Qui-Gon asked in a neutral tone.

"I didn't have time to think about what I was doing," Obi-Wan replied. "The Force led me."

"Were you frightened? Angry?"

"Both," Obi-Wan admitted. "I... fired on the pirates. I killed, but I didn't do it in anger. I did it to save lives."

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Qui-Gon nodded, just the smallest of movements. "I see." It was the answer Qui-Gon had been looking for. It demonstrated that Obi-Wan was growing stronger in the ways of the Force.

Yet Qui-Gon felt strangely dissatisfied. He tested his heart. Had he actually wanted the boy to fail his test? That would be a grave flaw for a Jedi.

But he couldn't help himself. True, Obi-Wan had not let him down. He had bravely accepted the task of piloting the ship. Hundreds of lives had been in his hands, and he had not hesitated. He had done honor to his training.

Why was it so hard for Qui-Gon to trust him still?

Because I trusted another. I trusted Xanatos completely, and disaster was the result.

The sense of loss was so great that even now Qui-Gon felt it like a living wound. He'd rather have taken a dozen blows from the pirate chieftain's vibro-ax than to ever feel such loss and pain again.

Obi-Wan stood before Qui-Gon, confused. He was so tired he was almost weaving on his feet. Had he answered badly or well? He didn't know. All he could sense was a struggle in Qui-Gon that he didn't understand. They had worked together to save the ship. A bond should have formed between them. But Obi-Wan felt they were farther apart than ever.

Should he speak? Perhaps if he asked Qui-Gon what he was thinking, the Jedi would tell him.

But before Obi-Wan could raise his nerve, a vicious pounding sounded at the door. Obi-Wan hurried to open it.

Si Treemba rushed in. The Arconan was out of breath, panting.

"What's wrong?" Qui-Gon asked. He stood and tenderly stretched his shoulder, to see how well the glue had set.

"Please come quickly," Si Treemba panted. "Jemba the Hutt has stolen our dactyl!"

Chapter Fifteen

“You won’t get away with this,” Qui-Gon warned Jemba the Hutt. He spoke calmly. Behind Qui-Gon, dozens of Arconans stood silent. Obi-Wan stood among them, watching the Jedi’s back. Qui-Gon was sorely wounded, and seemed on the verge of collapse.

Jemba shook in amusement like a giant gray worm. “What can you do, puny Jedi?” he boomed gleefully. “No one can stop the great Jemba! Your Arconans were too frightened to face the pirates. They hid, while my men fought and died. Soon these cowards will be my slaves!”

Jemba and his men had taken over the Arconans’ lounge. A wall of Offworld miners—Hutts, Whiphids, Humans, and droids—backed Jemba. The Offworlders stood ready for battle. Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and the Arconans stared down the barrels of at least thirty blasters. Some of the Offworld thugs also held shields and wore armor. Jemba’s men obviously held more than just the Arconans’ dactyl. They held most of the ship’s weapons.

Obi-Wan felt outraged. Beside him, Clat’Ha was livid. She held her hands down loosely, ready to draw her weapon. But she and the Arconans would be vastly outgunned.

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"It is not justice you seek, Jemba," Qui-Gon tried to reason. "You hope only to satisfy your greed. Nothing will be solved this way. Put down your weapons."

Qui-Gon called on the Force, trying to coax the Hutt to stop this madness. But for hours now he'd been focusing on his wound, trying to speed its healing, ignoring his own pain. He was too weak to persuade the Hutt.

Jemba waved a hand, as if testing the air. "Ooh, is that your powerful Force I feel? Ha!" he spat. "Your Jedi tricks are so puny, they make me laugh. They cannot work on the great Jemba. And look at you, Jedi. You don't have the sense to stay out of the way of a vibro-ax. Anyone can see you are too frail to fight. There is nothing you can do to stop me."

Fury filled Obi-Wan at the Hutt's taunting. He leaped past Qui-Gon, directly in front of Jemba.

"I can stop you!" he shouted. He brought up his lightsaber.

Jemba's huge eyes narrowed in anger. The thugs who surrounded him held their ground. They weren't afraid of a mere boy.

"What, Jedi?" Jemba said contemptuously to Qui-Gon. "You send a child to fight me? Is this some insult?" Jemba looked to his right and left, and raised a huge fist. If he let it fall, Obi-Wan knew that it would be the signal for his men to open fire. Obi-Wan would not be able to deflect more than a few blaster bolts.

Qui-Gon reached out and touched Obi-Wan's elbow. "Put your lightsaber away," he said calmly. "You can't win like this. If he opens fire, people will die needlessly. A Jedi must know his *true* enemies."

Obi-Wan was shaking. He suddenly felt confused.

"What do you mean?" he asked. Sweat streamed down his face. "Which one of them is our enemy?"

"Anger is our enemy," Qui-Gon said reasonably. He shot a glare across the room to Jemba. "Greed and fear are also our enemies. The Arconans can live without dactyl for awhile. You do not need to fight now. Haste is another enemy."

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Obi-Wan saw the wisdom in Qui-Gon's words. He powered down his lightsaber, bowed to Jemba as if to a worthy opponent, and stepped back.

"A wise move, little one," Jemba said. Then the Hutt broke into a deep laugh. He shouted across the room to the Arconans, "I want workers. And I am willing to pay well."

The Hutt's voice created a small echo. Behind Qui-Gon, Arconans began to mutter restlessly, almost a humming sound.

Clat'Ha shouted, "Offworld doesn't pay its workers well!"

Jemba pounded his chest. "I will pay in food and dactyl!" he said. "For a day of labor, I will give my workers a day of life!"

"You offer to pay these people with dactyl that you stole from them?" Obi-Wan asked. He could not believe what he heard. It was all he could do to restrain from launching himself across the room to hack Jemba to pieces.

Jemba smiled hugely. "Indeed. Those who work for me will live. Those who do not will die. What better pay could I give?"

The Arconans had been talking softly. To Obi-Wan's further amazement, some of them immediately began to stride across the room toward Jemba. More followed. Si Treemba hesitated, then joined them.

"Wait!" Clat'Ha commanded the Arconans. "What are you doing?"

The Arconans stopped and looked back. "We are miners," Si Treemba said. "Whether we live under Jemba, or under another, it matters not."

"But, Si Treemba, what of your freedom?" Obi-Wan asked. "You can't just give it up!"

Si Treemba looked at him sadly. "You are our friend, Obi-Wan. But you do not understand. Humans may value freedom as much as life. But we do not." As a group, the Arconans turned and headed toward Jemba.

Obi-Wan struggled to understand his friend's words. Arconans were hatched in nests where they shared everything. On Arcona, they dug in the soil for deep roots that held water

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and food. They relied upon one another wholly. Once on Bandomeer, they would mine for Jemba. As long as their community survived, as long as *we* remained, freedom did not matter.

“If you go with him,” Clat’Ha warned, “he will take all that he can from you, and give nothing in return except what is already yours by right. Jemba will grow huge, while the Arconans grow weak. Is that what you want?”

“No,” Si Treemba admitted. “But we do not wish to die.”

“Then you must fight him,” Clat’Ha urged. “When you are faced with danger, you build walls and hide behind them. That is the Arconan way. But when a daggerlip tears down your walls, you fight. Jemba is no better than a daggerlip. He intends to destroy us. We can defeat him.”

Clat’Ha drew her blaster, and the Offworld miners raised their weapons and shields, prepared to fight. Obi-Wan studied the fiery woman. Her fierceness filled the room. All it needed was a spark to ignite.

It was a battle they were bound to lose. Qui-Gon was right. This was not the time or place to fight. Jemba had to be stopped. They could not stop him here.

“Si Treemba,” Obi-Wan called. “Friend. I ask this one thing of you. Wait.”

Qui-Gon shot him a look of respect. Obi-Wan did not have time to be pleased by it. He focused all his attention on Si Treemba. Sometimes, the force of friendship could work where the Force could not.

Si Treemba faced him, torn. It would take an act of great courage for him to divide himself from his fellow Arconans, Obi-Wan knew. He waited, knowing that to speak again would be to insult Si Treemba.

Slowly, Si Treemba nodded. Then he moved to the other side of the room to stand with Obi-Wan and Clat’Ha.

A low, anxious hissing filled the room. One by one, the Arconans followed Si Treemba.

Chapter Sixteen

The meeting ended in a stalemate. There was nothing left to do but leave. Obi-Wan stayed with Qui-Gon. Although the Jedi held himself erect during the confrontation, sweat beaded his forehead and Obi-Wan could only imagine the concentration it took for him to stay focused.

"I'll see you back to your cabin," Obi-Wan told him. He knew Qui-Gon must be feeling weak when the Jedi didn't try to argue.

By the time Qui-Gon reached the corridor where his cabin was located, his walk was unsteady and his vision clouded. He was grateful for Obi-Wan's presence at his side. As he rounded the last corner, he staggered. Obi-Wan grabbed his arm and held him upright.

"Are you all right?" Obi-Wan asked, his voice thick with concern.

"I will be," Qui-Gon said weakly. "I... just need... to focus."

Obi-Wan helped him into his cabin and waited until he was seated. A plan had been growing in his mind since the confrontation. This time, he would not make the mistake of failing to inform Qui-Gon.

"Master Jinn," Obi-Wan began. "I have an idea. I will go back into the air vents, into Off-world territory. I know the layout now. I will wait till Jemba is alone and ambush him."

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Qui-Gon closed his eyes for a moment, as if Obi-Wan's suggestion had pained him as much as his wound. "No," he said flatly. "You will not."

Just moments ago, he had been impressed by Obi-Wan's handling of the Arconan situation, and how he had backed off from Jemba with dignity. Now the boy was making reckless plans again, letting his eagerness take over his judgment.

Of course, Qui-Gon had to admit, the plans were no more reckless than some of those Qui-Gon had thought up in his own youth. Still, he felt a disappointment so keen that it surprised him. Were his feelings continually to take him unaware when it came to this boy?

Wearily, Qui-Gon raised himself up in the chair. His shoulder suddenly flamed where the pirate had struck him. He'd been holding that pain at bay, but now it overwhelmed him.

"Look, you're wounded," Obi-Wan said. "I know you can't fight now. But *I* could do it for you! I can hold back my anger and do what must be done. If Jemba were dead—"

"Nothing would change," Qui-Gon said wearily. "Obi-Wan, can't you see? Killing Jemba is not the answer. Jemba is but one Hutt. There are always more, just as evil and greedy as he is. If you kill him, it won't stop his plan from going forward. Another like him, perhaps someone worse, will take his place. What we must do is try to teach these people that—"

"But he is evil, isn't he?" Obi-Wan asked.

"What Jemba is trying to do is wrong," Qui-Gon answered carefully.

"I've never seen anyone who was so evil!" Obi-Wan burst out.

A sad smile touched Qui-Gon's lips. "And have you been so many places, young Obi-Wan?"

Obi-Wan fell silent. He had much to learn. His heart cried out that Jemba was evil, and that evil had spread to enslave innocent victims. If anyone deserved to meet a bitter fate, it was the Hutt. But he would listen to Qui-Gon.

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"I've seen far worse," Qui-Gon continued. "If you think of killing in anger, you must know such thoughts come from the dark side."

"Then how can we make him give the dactyl back?" Obi-Wan asked.

"You can't. You can't force people to be just and decent. Such qualities must arise from within—they cannot be forced from without. For now, I choose to wait. Perhaps Jemba will have a change of heart. Or perhaps some darker fate awaits him. In either case, killing is not the solution."

"But... you've killed before," Obi-Wan added hesitantly.

"I have," Qui-Gon admitted, "when there was no other choice. But when I kill, I only win a fight. It's a small, small victory. There are greater battles to be won—battles of the heart. Sometimes, with patience and reason and by setting a good example, I have won more than a fight—I have turned my adversary into a friend."

Obi-Wan considered this. Despite his pain and weakness, Qui-Gon was taking the time to explain his thoughts to Obi-Wan. Only yesterday, the Jedi most likely would have issued a stern order, then dismissed him. Something had changed between them.

"You're testing me, aren't you," Obi-Wan guessed. "You've changed your mind. You are considering me for your Padawan." He tried to keep the eagerness out of his voice.

Qui-Gon shook his head. "No," he said firmly. "I'm not testing you, Obi-Wan. *Life* tests you! Every day it brings you new chances for triumph or defeat. And if you pass the test, it doesn't make you a Jedi. It makes you human."

Obi-Wan stepped back, as if Qui-Gon had slapped him. With a rush of emotion, he saw into his own heart. He had been fooling himself. He had told himself that he had accepted Qui-Gon's decision, that all he wanted was his respect. But somewhere deep inside, he had hoped that if he acted bravely and well on this mission, Qui-Gon would change his mind.

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Now he saw the truth.

Qui-Gon saw the change in Obi-Wan's eyes. The boy finally understood that his decision was final. He should have been relieved. The boy's anger had left him. But something else was gone as well. Obi-Wan's hopes for the future had also faded.

Qui-Gon watched as Obi-Wan turned and wiped his face with his sleeve. Was the boy crying? Had he hurt him so deeply?

But when Obi-Wan turned back, only sweat was gone from his face. Qui-Gon could see no glistening sign of tears. Instead, he saw the worst kind of defeat.

It stung him. After all his noble talk of winning the hearts of enemies, he realized that he had just crushed the heart of a boy who only hoped to become his ally.

Chapter Seventeen

Obi-Wan left Qui-Gon's cabin in a daze. He needed rest, but he could not seem to light anywhere. He tried his cabin, then the lounge. At last he wandered the halls aimlessly. He ended up near the engine rooms, staring out at the wasteland of the unnamed planet.

Five moons, in shades of red and blue, hung like ripe fruits out over a silent ocean. A flight of dragons hovered high in the air, asleep on the wing. The island shore was nothing more than a treacherous bit of wave-carved rock. Farther inland, dark volcanic peaks vented steam, and there dragons perched by the hundreds.

A door hissed open behind him. A moment later, Si Treemba stood by his side.

"We have been searching for you," he said.

"I needed to think," Obi-Wan answered. He was glad to see his friend. Si Treemba had showed him the greatest trust in the meeting with Jemba. It had forged their friendship, and they both knew it.

"May we ask what you are thinking about?" Si Treemba asked hesitantly.

"I thought that my time in the Temple was hard in many ways," Obi-Wan said. "The days were filled with study and

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effort. The very best was expected of us. I respected my teachers so much, and I thought I knew what I needed not only to survive, but to excel.” Obi-Wan took a breath. “Now I see that I had no idea what kind of evil the universe could show me. I’ve never seen real greed before, not like the greed of the pirates or Jemba. It sickens me.”

“As it should,” Si Treemba agreed. “It is a horrible thing.”

“And I am wondering... do I have the seeds of the same greed?” Obi-Wan wondered.

Si Treemba looked at his friend, puzzled. He saw great anguish on Obi-Wan’s face. “Why would you ask that, Obi-Wan?”

“Because, all my life, I’ve wanted to be a Jedi. I craved it so much. I was willing to fight for the honor, and I became angry when others stood in my way.”

“A Jedi gives much to his fellow men,” Si Treemba answered thoughtfully. “He protects the weak, he battles for the common good. We do not think it is evil for you to want to do well. No, that is not greed.”

Obi-Wan nodded, still looking out at the dark sea. He felt a deep longing to be home, back at the Temple, where things had clarity and purpose. Here, he felt lost.

“It will be light in a few hours. You have done so much for me already. Si Treemba. But will you help me one last time?”

“Of course we shall,” Si Treemba said promptly. “But how?”

“Help me overcome my anger,” Obi-Wan said. His fingers were curled into fists. He looked down at them and uncurled them, then gripped the frame of the view screen. “I feel such rage toward Jemba. He wants to use other people for his own gain, and I want to kill him for that. But I don’t like the way I feel right now. Qui-Gon was right. If I tried to stop Jemba, I would be doing so only to satisfy my own rage.”

“You seem calm,” Si Treemba observed.

“Something has happened,” Obi-Wan told him quietly. “I just realized something. Qui-Gon will never take me as a Padawan.

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He feels I am unworthy, and perhaps he is right. Maybe I wouldn't be good at it."

"And you are not angry?" Si Treemba asked, surprised.

"No," Obi-Wan said. "I feel strange, Si Treemba. It's as if a burden has been lifted from me. Perhaps I could be a good farmer. And to be good... to be a *good person* is more important than being a Jedi."

"But what about Jemba?" Si Treemba asked.

"Yoda once told me that there are trillions of people in the galaxy, and only a few thousand Jedi Knights. He said that we cannot try to right every wrong. All creatures must learn to stand for what is right, and not always rely upon the Jedi. Perhaps that is what the Arconans must do. I don't know about the future. But today I choose not to fight."

Obi-Wan turned to Si Treemba. "I asked you to leave your fellow Arconans to give us a chance to help you. I haven't gone back on that promise. I won't see you sicken again for lack of dactyl. I stand with you, Si Treemba. Somehow, we will find a way."

Chapter Eighteen

Qui-Gon's Jedi healing techniques required him to put all of his energy toward knitting his torn muscles and fighting infection. Yet time and again he found his thoughts returning to Obi-Wan, to the look of defeat on the boy's face during their talk.

Why did the boy exert such a persistent tug? He had seen so many boys over the years. Time and again he had gently informed them that they did not have it in them to become a Jedi Knight. He had done it compassionately, and saved them from the difficult struggle of finding out too late. Hadn't he?

Resolutely, Qui-Gon settled himself on the sleep-couch. Regrets would keep him awake, and he needed sleep.

The ship was eerily quiet. Everyone was exhausted from the battle with the pirates. Qui-Gon heard nothing but the slap of waves on the shore and the soft rhythmic murmur of some animals skittering under the ship. He hoped the sound would lull him to sleep.

But he slept restlessly, due to pain or regret he could not say. Half-awake from a tortured dream, Qui-Gon rose and crossed for a towel to wipe his sweaty forehead. He drank some water, then rested his hot forehead against the cool transparisteel of his small portal. The craggy cliffs in the distance seemed to shimmer

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and vibrate. Was his fever getting worse? An odd, yellow mist blurred his vision.

He had risen too soon. Qui-Gon felt his way back to the sleep-couch. This time, he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When he woke in the early morning, his right arm was stiff but better. A ship's droid had mended and cleaned his robes. As he donned them, he realized he was hungry. It was a good sign.

As he headed for the kitchen, he saw that the ship was abuzz. Arconans rushed past him, carrying crates of their personal belongings.

He asked one what was wrong.

"The tide is coming in," the Arconan said, "and it may swamp the ship. The engines are all down for repair, and we won't get them up in time. We have been ordered to evacuate."

"Evacuate?" Qui-Gon asked in surprise. With the dragons outside, that sounded dangerous. "Evacuate to where?"

"Into the hills, higher up on the island. The ship's crew found some caves. We must reach them before the sun is in the sky and the dragons waken." The Arconan rushed away, heavy packs and boxes in tow.

From bad to worse, Qui-Gon realized. Shot down by pirates, wrecked on an alien world with Jemba holding a gun to them all. And now they would have to abandon ship, hide in caves with limited supplies. He could feel a rising danger. Perhaps the pirates would come to finish them off, or maybe they'd all starve, or die fighting one another. Perhaps the tides would rise so high that they'd flood the whole island.

The Arconans rushing past looked weary and battered. They had not gotten dactyl last night, and would have none this morning. Qui-Gon wondered how long they could keep going without it.

He strode to Clat'Ha's cabin and found her hurriedly packing her belongings. Her door was open.

She looked up when he entered the room. "You'd better hurry and pack," she said. "The tide is coming in fast and the sun

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will rise soon. We have to get off the ship.” She grinned as she pushed a strand of red-brown hair out of her eyes. Her green eyes gleamed with mischief. “Jemba is furious. Maybe he’s afraid he won’t fit in a cave.”

“Why is he so angry?” Qui-Gon asked curiously.

Clat’Ha shrugged. “Because it’s something out of his control, I suppose. At first he thought the crew was lying. But even he had to realize we could drown if we stayed. It was almost worth it just to see him back down.”

Qui-Gon frowned. “How soon do the Arconans need dactyl?”

The amusement in Clat’Ha’s eyes instantly changed to worry. “Some of them are already beginning to fade,” she said quietly. “If they don’t get dactyl by tonight, they’ll start to sicken and die.”

“So soon,” Qui-Gon murmured. Something nagged at him, an instinct telling him that he had overlooked something.

Jemba’s anger. The soft tread of animals. A solid cliff that moved. A yellow haze...

But no animals lived on the island, only draigons. The crew had investigated for predators shortly after they’d landed. And the haze hadn’t been in front of his eyes. A cave in the cliff itself had been glowing with a faint yellow light.

Realization sparked within him. “Tell the Arconans not to be afraid,” he told Clat’Ha crisply. “I think I know where the dactyl is. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“I’ll come with you,” Clat’Ha offered instantly. “Or we could round up some help—”

Qui-Gon considered this. No doubt the dactyl would be guarded. But with hungry draigons hunting in the morning skies, too many people might attract their attention. Not to mention that Jemba would be on the watch. But one man dressed in dark robes, traveling alone...

“I’m sorry, Clat’Ha,” he said. “I know you will hate what I’m about to ask you to do.”

Dave Wolverton

"I'll do anything," Clat'Ha declared fiercely. "We have to find that dactyl!"

"No, you don't understand," Qui-Gon said. "I'm asking you to wait."

Grelb the Hutt was good at following orders, especially when he knew that Jemba might eat his tail if he didn't. He sat on a rock midway up the cliffside, his blaster rifle at the ready. From here, he had a good view of the ship. Jemba had sent him here for two reasons—to protect the miners and Arconans as they evacuated the ship, and to make sure that no one climbed to reach the high caves.

Not that Jemba cared about the Arconans.

But now they were his property. He was protecting an investment.

So far, the dragons that hovered up so high in the air and that perched on craggy rocks in the hills had not spotted the Hutts and Arconans and Whiphids. The early morning mist shrouded them from view. Yet Grelb kept careful watch, prepared to shoot any dragon that swooped from the sky—or any Arconan that gave him trouble.

Last night, darkness had provided a cover for the hard climb upward into the cliffs with the dactyl. Jemba had ordered the Whiphids to do most of the work. Their feet were heavily padded, and would not make sounds while they loaded the dactyl onto packs and snuck away from the ship. No one had seen them, Grelb was sure. The rest of the miners on the ship had been busy licking their wounds after the pirate fight, and the Arconans were too afraid to stick their flat noses out of their cabins.

It had been a setback when the crew had ordered everyone off the ship and into the caves. Even Jemba had been worried that someone would stumble upon the cache of dactyl. It was lucky that they had forced the Whiphids to climb so high.

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The mist was starting to break up, but gray clouds were rolling in from the west. The air smelled of salt and distant lightning. Grelb worried that the lightning would drive more dragons to ground here on the island.

As the Arconans emptied from the huge dark ship, one man caught Grelb's eye: the Jedi Knight, Qui-Gon Jinn. He wore a cloak and hood, but Grelb instantly recognized him by his size and grace. Qui-Gon walked swiftly past the Arconans as though anxious to reach the caves. Yet it was not like him to hurry to safety.

Grelb fished a pair of macrobinoculars from his pocket and trained them on the Jedi. Qui-Gon climbed the hill quickly, without tiring. But instead of ducking into the first cave where the Arconans had already gathered, he continued to climb, inching along a narrow ledge in order to reach the side of the mountain without being seen.

Grelb would have gladly slithered after the Jedi and shot him, but dared not do so without Jemba's permission. He reached down to his comm unit and pushed a button. In seconds Jemba answered.

"The Jedi Knight is heading up the mountain," Grelb said.

"Where is he going?" Jemba barked. He sounded frightened, and for good reason.

"I don't know. But I don't like it," Grelb answered.

Jemba hesitated only a moment. "Take some reinforcements with you, and see that he doesn't return."

Si Treemba looked ill. The healthy greenish tone of his skin was fading to gray, and his small scales were beginning to flake off. Qui-Gon had been gone for hours now.

When Clat'Ha had told him that Qui-Gon had gone in search of the dactyl, frustration had filled Obi-Wan. He accepted that he would not be the Jedi's Padawan, but couldn't Qui-Gon ask him for help, just once?

Of course he had not. Of course he had gone alone.

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In the dank cave, Obi-Wan studied his friend with a frown. The Hutts and Whiphids had taken the only lights into a larger cavern, so that only reflected light had worked its way in.

The Arconans had settled into the back of the farthest cavern—and what strange caverns they were. Each cave measured four meters wide at its narrowest point, and ten meters tall. Perhaps a dozen passages led to the surface. But tunnels opened wide into huge hollows in many places. Claw marks on the floors showed that an animal had dug them, yet the Arconans found nothing in the lair.

The Offworlders guarded the entrance to make certain no one fled. Stalactites hung overhead like glittering spears, and there was nothing to sit on but broken stones. In the dank shadows, the eyes of the Arconans glowed faintly.

Si Treemba was humming in Arconan. Others nearby did the same. Obi-Wan leaned closer to his friend.

“What are you humming?” he asked softly.

“We sing a song of thanksgiving,” Si Treemba said. He translated for Obi-Wan.

“The sun is finally hidden,
and here our world is black.
In this cave we have the stones,
and our brothers at our back.

“Outside the storms may threaten.
But here the day is calm.
We’ll cleave to earth like flesh to bone.
With our brothers we belong.”

It seemed a sad song to Obi-Wan. But he was not an Arconan. He was not used to making a cave his home. Perhaps to Si Treemba, the song sounded more joyous.

The Arconans sounded as if they were resigned to their deaths. He could not understand such resignation. The urge to

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act, to fight, was becoming stronger by the minute. Obi-Wan struggled against the feeling. Hadn't he been warned about his impatience again and again? This was his test. He must live by the Jedi Code and wait, even while his friend faded. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done. But he trusted Qui-Gon.

"Promise me," Obi-Wan said quietly to Si Treemba, "that you won't let yourself die here."

"We won't let ourselves die," Si Treemba promised.

"Do you mean it? You'll hold on until Qui-Gon comes back?" Obi-Wan asked urgently.

"We will try to live, Obi-Wan," Si Treemba promised. "But the dactyl must come soon."

Chapter Nineteen

Cautiously, Qui-Gon Jinn inched up a ledge that no Human should have been able to climb. In a pouring rain, he grasped small crevices with his fingers and toes, barely holding on.

He knew that he had to hurry. He had spent extra time approaching from the side of the mountain, knowing he would be too easy to spot if he climbed directly up. But at last he'd come to a point where he had to risk exposure. From now on, his path was straight up.

At the moment, he was more concerned about the dragons than the Hutts. The creatures were active now. Many had landed on crags above, as if to wait out the storm. He remained in the shadows, moving beneath rocks, afraid he might be spotted. Sometimes, he had to wait painful minutes until some dragon would turn its scaly silver head.

Patience, he told himself over and over again.

We must have patience. That was an unwritten part of the Jedi Code. Yet it *was* hard to be patient when so many lives hung in the balance.

His fingers were chafed and bleeding. Nearby, lightning split the sky and thunder snarled. The sky was dark and lowering. Wind gusted and whistled among the stones.

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He felt terribly exposed. He was a big man, a big target for the dragons. A flash of lightning could expose his position—or even knock him to his death.

He stopped for a long moment, panting. Rain poured down his forehead and made his clothes feel heavy. He felt half-frozen, and still weak from the wounds the pirate had dealt. He glanced toward the ocean. Not far off, a gleaming dragon dropped like a blaster bolt toward the sea, its wings folded.

It plunged into the pounding surf, then flapped its wings. As it rose from the white-capped waves, a huge glittering fish wriggled in its mouth.

Thankfully, the dragon had not seen him. Or if it had, it did not care for Human flesh. Perhaps the dragons had never seen animals on land, and did not think to hunt there.

Qui-Gon did not dare look down. Up above him a few hundred meters, he could see a faint mist vented from a crevice blowing wildly in the wind. It would take the sharp eye of someone who knew what they were looking for, but the mist was definitely tainted with yellow.

The dactyl would be there.

The travel was hard. There were no trails. Not a rock on this planet had ever been crushed underfoot. If he stepped on a rock, it was likely to twist beneath him. Even if it didn't turn, they felt sharp and painful beneath his feet. The only plants he found were small gray lichens that crusted over everything. When they were dry, walking on them was like walking on carpet. But once the morning rains began to fall, the lichens turned slick.

Though he could feel the Force guiding him to the dactyl, it still seemed an almost impossible task.

Lightning sizzled through the air. Thunder shook the stone beneath his fingertips. Wind gusted at his back. Qui-Gon clung to the face of the rock wall. His shoulder throbbed.

Not much farther, he told himself.

There was a flash just above his head. Splinters of rock stung his cheek.

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For half a moment, he thought that a lightning bolt had nearly pierced him. But he realized that it was too small.

A blaster. Someone had shot at him!

Qui-Gon craned his neck, and tried to look down. He spotted them immediately in the rocks below. It was difficult for a Hutt to hide. It was Grelb, Jemba's errand boy. He slithered along, flanked by several Whiphids. They raised heavy blaster rifles and fired again. The Hutt laughed merrily.

Blaster bolts exploded all around Qui-Gon.

His lightsaber was useless. There was nowhere to hide, no way to fight.

Painfully, Qui-Gon struggled upward.

Grelb the Hutt chortled in delight. His plan had worked perfectly. He knew Qui-Gon would have to appear around the side of the mountain and make the last ascent straight up to the dactyl. All he had to do was find a position, and wait.

At first, he'd been afraid of the draigons, and he'd kept still, hoping to be mistaken for a rock. But gradually, Grelb had grown comfortable. The draigons were probably fish-eaters, nothing more.

He didn't fear their teeth—but the rough stones of this world threatened to tear through even Grelb's thick hide. The Hutt wanted nothing more than to slither carefully back to the ship.

But right now he had a job to do: kill the Jedi.

It was going to be a pleasure.

The Jedi was trapped on a cliff face above, squirming up toward the ledge where the dactyl was hidden. Qui-Gon had no blaster to shoot back with. He was a big target. It looked as if this would be an easy kill.

So Grelb told his cronies, "Take your time. Have some fun."

His Whiphids whimpered in delight. They loved to torment helpless creatures. They kept up a steady barrage of fire, purposely missing the Jedi with every shot. They hit just close enough to try to terrify the Jedi.

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Grelb chortled, “Look at him squirm, boys! Reminds me of that puffer I ate for dinner last night!”

But the truth was, the Jedi did not squirm. He didn’t cringe, or try to scramble away. His pace didn’t change at all. Slowly, methodically, he climbed the cliff face, even as rock splintered millimeters from his face.

The Whiphids grew angry. “Is he blind?” one asked in a complaining tone. “This is no fun at all.”

Grelb frowned. He did not want the Whiphids to complain. He needed their loyalty. “How about a bet?” he suggested. “See who can blow off his boot.”

“Excellent!” the first Whiphid cried. “Bet you five I can knock off his boot in one shot!”

“In one shot?” his companion hooted. And the bet was on.

To sweeten the deal, Grelb bet against the Whiphid at two-to-one odds. Eagerly, he watched the Jedi make his steady progress up the cliff. The two Whiphids who made the bet brought their guns to rest on their shoulders. He waited breathlessly for the first Whiphid to take his shot. Lightning flashed, thunder roared.

There was a blast of wind at Grelb’s back.

The Jedi had his right foot on a tiny ledge. He reached out for a handhold above. He was precariously balanced. One shot in the foot would probably bring him down.

“Shoot already!” Grelb shouted.

Behind him, there was a strange noise. Something like an *urp*.

Grelb turned to look at the Whiphid marksman, and there standing hugely at Grelb’s back was a dragon. It had landed so silently, he had not heard it.

It was the first he’d seen up close. The dragon had tiny silver scales over all of its body, and huge yellow eyes like those on a fish. It had no front legs, only a single huge claw on each wing. And its mouth had the strangest teeth—like enormous needles that arced down from its gums. The monster vaguely reminded him of an Ithorian razor shark.

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The huge reptile had half of the Whiphid marksman in its mouth.

“Aaagh!” Grelb screamed as he slithered toward the nearest crevice.

The Whiphids all turned and began to fire at the dragon.

Qui-Gon pulled himself up the last three meters, then wedged himself into the small cave. There, he paused, panting for a long moment, clutching his sore right arm. The acrid scent of sulfur and ammonia assaulted him. He peered farther inside the cave. The dactyl crystals had been thrown on the smooth floor of the cave, and were giving off the dull yellowish glow.

The blaster fire was coming as fast as ever. The guns made a steady *boom boom boom*. But the shots were no longer directed at him. Instead, the Whiphids had hidden in the rocks, firing at dragons. The blaster fire attracted them by the score, and dragons roared in the sky, flocking down from the cliffs. Several of the huge beasts had collapsed around the Whiphids, but others were wheeling from the skies in a feeding frenzy.

Qui-Gon looked down from the cliff, watching the struggle. He had traveled all morning without attracting the attention of a dragon. Now, by shooting their blasters, the stupid Whiphids were drawing them down in droves.

Dragons screamed, a great shrieking cry, and dove out of the clouds on leathery silver wings. They soared over the stones and swiveled their heads. Teeth gleamed under the strobe of lightning flashes.

The Whiphids scattered and tried to hide beneath huge slabs of stone. One Whiphid roared in terror as a dragon dropped from the sky and plucked it from its hiding place.

Qui-Gon used the diversion to load the dactyl into the cloth sack he had brought. For several minutes the Whiphids fought and screamed and died as dozens and dozens of the huge dragons plummeted toward them.

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Suddenly, a great shadow blocked the light to the cave. A dragon shrieked, a cry so piercing that the rock around Qui-Gon trembled. He pressed himself against the side of the cave.

Outside the mouth of the fissure, the dragon clutched the rock with its wing talons. It let out the piercing cry again, and Qui-Gon knew it was no use.

He had been seen.

As dragons hurtled from the skies, Grelb slithered quietly away.

The huge hairy Whiphids danced among the rocks, shooting their blasters and bellowing war cries. They made quite a diversion.

Fortunately for Grelb, young Hutts—like certain kinds of worms and slugs—are adept at squeezing through tight holes and wedging themselves between rocks.

Thus Grelb moved quickly away from the huge Whiphids, and let them battle the dragons alone.

He was halfway down the mountain when he finally dared to stick his head up enough to gaze off toward the vast ocean. Even then, he held his heavy blaster rifle close to his chest. The tide had indeed risen, and now lapped against the hull of the *Monument*. But it looked as if Jemba had fled the ship in vain. It would not be swamped today. Grelb felt relieved to know that he might still make it off this rock alive.

Behind him, on the mountain, the Whiphids were issuing fewer war cries, and had quit firing their blasters. Grelb should have shivered in terror to think what had happened to them.

The dragon's shriek had alerted others from the flock. They vied for position as the first dragon wedged its long silver head into the cave opening. Lightning streaked through the sky behind it. Teeth longer than knives flashed near Qui-Gon's face, and he could smell the scent of dead fish on the dragon's breath.

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Suddenly, in the middle of his desperation, Qui-Gon felt something odd—a faint ripple in the Force. As he concentrated, it grew stronger. Someone was calling him, a Jedi.

Obi-Wan needs me! he realized.

Astonished, he pressed himself farther back in the cave. He needed to be calm, to think. The boy shouldn't have been able to call him. Obi-Wan was not his Padawan. They were not connected.

But he had no time to wonder about the call's meaning. It was urgent and must be obeyed. Hearing movement, Qui-Gon quickly glanced toward the cave opening. For a moment the dragon beat its wings against the stones, blocking Qui-Gon's escape. Then suddenly it dropped from its clumsy perch.

Long had Qui-Gon followed the ways of the Force. Now he felt it beckon him. *Run*, it commanded. *Go to Obi-Wan*.

Qui-Gon's heart pounded. He ran three steps and leaped from the mouth of the cave, knowing that two hundred meters below, the sharp rocks stuck up like swords. Yet he trusted the Force.

He did not fall even a dozen meters. His leap carried him straight to a dragon!

He hit the beast's neck with a thud. The creature was wet and slimy. Qui-Gon almost slipped off, but clung to its scaly hide with the tips of his fingers. The sore muscles in his shoulder throbbed and burned. He managed to swing his legs up and over, so that he was riding squarely on the dragon's back.

The creature roared in terror. It had been flying up to eat the Jedi. Now it shook its neck, trying to throw him off. It shrieked again and again, then wheeled in panic and flapped its wings, dropping toward the sea.

Qui-Gon clutched his precious bag of dactyl in one hand and leaned close to his dragon's neck. Using all the power that he could muster, he whispered to the dragon. "Friend, help me. Take me down to the caves. Hurry!"

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The dragons that were hunting Whiphids heard the desperate shriek of Qui-Gon's mount. They looked up and saw the man on its back. Now the dragons rose in a flock to give chase.

His mount flapped its wings and sped toward the caves. Qui-Gon wasn't sure if he could control the beast for long, for its small mind was cruel, and it was driven by a ravenous hunger.

Grelb had been lamenting the death of his Whiphid henchmen when he glanced back toward the mountain. Dragons flocked there by the hundreds.

To his amazement, he saw Qui-Gon Jinn leap from his crevasse onto the back of a hunting dragon. The Jedi wheeled away, down toward the ship.

Grelb's jaw dropped, and he dove for cover beneath a rock. There, he sat trembling. The Jedi was alive and heading back down the mountain. That meant only one thing.

Grelb was done for. Jemba would kill him with one blow as soon as he showed his face. Or perhaps he would kill him slowly, as a lesson.

He had not clawed his way to a position of power, second only to Jemba, to let a Jedi defeat him. He had worked so hard! All that killing, all that torture of innocents, all that profit, it could not go to waste.

He would have to kill the Jedi himself, before Qui-Gon reached the caves and Jemba saw him.

As fast as he could, Grelb slithered among the rocks.

Chapter Twenty

In the caves the Arconans were fading fast. Their bioluminescent eyes were growing dim, like fading embers from a fire.

Nearby, Clat'Ha and a couple of other Humans helped care for the failing Arconans. The usually fiery woman looked drained, worn out. There was really nothing they could do for the Arconans except make them comfortable.

Si Treemba hadn't stirred in hours. He whispered to Obi-Wan that he was saving his strength. Yet Obi-Wan guessed that his friend was really too weak to move.

Obi-Wan was desperate. He hated sitting by, unable to help, as his friend slowly died. A dozen times he had thought of running out to find Qui-Gon. But he resisted the urge. He had to stay by his friend's side and protect him.

Obi-Wan rested his forehead on his knees in despair. He stared at the cave floor. What was the use of all his Jedi training? He had never felt so helpless. Nothing he had learned, nothing even Yoda had told him, could have prepared him for this moment. He had come to the end of everything—faith, hope, belief in himself. He had failed. All his life, he would remember this, his darkest moment.

Darkest moment...

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A memory stirred in Obi-Wan. He remembered a twilight conference with Yoda. “What is my limit, and how will I know when I find it?” Obi-Wan had asked. “And if I am pushed to the last, where can I turn for help?”

That was when Yoda had told him that in moments of extreme danger, when he had done everything he could, he could use the Force to call another Jedi. “Close, you must be,” Yoda had said. “Connected.”

Qui-Gon may not have thought they had a connection. But Obi-Wan had to try.

In the dark cave, he reached out for the Force. He felt it pulse, and he drew in its energy. He reached out with his Jedi senses, tried to feel the Jedi Master’s presence. But Obi-Wan was a young man, and could not control the Force as he wanted. So silently, he simply called: *Qui-Gon! Come back now! The Arconans will die soon without the dactyl.*

From the mouth of the cavern, there was a great rumbling laugh. Obi-Wan looked up. He had called Qui-Gon with everything he had, but instead, he had roused Jemba the Hutt. So much for his abilities.

Jemba towered above them, his immense bulk filling the mouth of the cavern. “How are you all feeling? Well, I hope,” he taunted. “Well, in case you’re not, I have dactyl for sale! Dactyl for the needy. All it will cost is your lives! We have some here, and much more hidden elsewhere.”

All around the cave, Arconans began to moan. Some of them turned over and began to crawl painfully toward the Hutt with his offers of dactyl.

Disgust filled Obi-Wan. He leaped to his feet. “Stop this!” he shouted. Before he knew it, his lightsaber was out. He covered fifty meters of ground, leaping over dozens of poor Arconans, until he stood before the monstrous Hutt. He flashed the lightsaber overhead in a practice swing. The sluglike Hutt could be seen clearly in its light. A dozen other Hutts and Whiphids

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filled the tunnel behind him, but Jemba's bulk would make it difficult for them to shoot.

"Well, well," Jemba roared. "I'm glad to see that you are brave, even when your Master is not at your back!"

"Leave, Jemba," Obi-Wan managed to say.

He was choking on his anger, and because his voice was changing, it cracked comically.

At his back, Clat'Ha appeared, blaster drawn. "He's right. You're not welcome here."

"Very well," Jemba boomed. "If that's what you want, I'll gladly leave your friends to die."

"Leave them the dactyl!" Obi-Wan ordered. He gripped the lightsaber, could feel its heat warming the heavy handle. The blade thrummed in the air, and his every muscle ached to leap forward and begin slicing. Sweat poured down Obi-Wan's face, and he gritted his teeth.

"Isn't this amusing!" Jemba rumbled to his cohorts. "He is no Force user, this one. It's in the ship's records. He is nothing more than a farmer, a reject from the Jedi Temple."

Obi-Wan fought back his rage at Jemba's taunt. For long seconds he struggled as he sought within him for a place of calm, of peace. Then he remembered Qui-Gon's words. Jemba was not the true enemy. Anger was.

At last he found the calm he needed. He reached out with his senses to touch the Force. He felt it now, around him, in Jemba, in the stones, in the Arconans fading so fast behind him. He felt it and gave himself to it.

"Qui-Gon!" Obi-Wan shouted in surprise.

He'd been so focused on calling to the Jedi Master for help that he felt astonished to suddenly feel something else: Qui-Gon was calling to *him* for help.

"Jemba, get out of my way!" Obi-Wan said. "Qui-Gon is in danger!"

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“Hah! Hah!” the great Hutt roared. He slapped his sides as if the laughing pained him. “Why does that not surprise me? Maybe it’s because I sent my men to kill him!”

But it wasn’t just Qui-Gon. Danger was coming to all of them. Qui-Gon wasn’t just calling for his help. He was trying to warn Obi-Wan.

“I mean it, Jemba,” Obi-Wan warned. “We’re all in trouble!”

“What would you have of me, little one?” Jemba asked. “Do you want me to look down at my shoes so that you can stab me? Ho, ho, ho! That trick won’t work on me. Hutts don’t have feet!”

He was wasting time. Obi-Wan somersaulted once in the air, and landed in front of Jemba. Then, using the momentum of his landing, he sprang over the Hutt’s head. Obi-Wan landed on Jemba’s back, and the Hutt howled.

“You have been warned!” Obi-Wan shouted, gripping his lightsaber tightly. Then he raced down Jemba’s tail and sprang over the heads of the surprised Whiphid guards.

One Whiphid fired his blaster at Obi-Wan’s retreating form, but Obi-Wan managed to bring his lightsaber over his back and deflect the blow. He raced through the tunnels, past the startled Hutts and Whiphids. His need to find Qui-Gon was overpowering. He was astonished to feel the Jedi Knight’s warning call, to feel this connection.

Behind him, a few Whiphids roared war cries, but Jemba shouted above the rest, “No! Leave him to me! The boy is mine!”

Chapter Twenty-One

“There, my friend,” Qui-Gon said to the dragon. He pointed toward the caves. The dozen passages to the cavern were all set within a single hill, and from the sky the cave mouths looked like wormholes.

Qui-Gon fought to control the dragon’s mind, bring it safely to the ground. He was worried. As far as the eye could see, dragons flocked toward the caves. Their roars were deafening as they called to each other.

Qui-Gon had seen the giant trees in the Silver Forest of Dreams on the planet Kubindi. Some of their vast leaves could be twenty meters wide, and when they fell in the autumn, they floated like giant rafts through the sky. That is what the dragons reminded him of. They dropped through leaden skies, just as the leaves floated from the Kubindi forests.

Yet these creatures were deadly; and like Qui-Gon, they were headed toward the caves.

Qui-Gon called with his mind, warning young Obi-Wan Kenobi again of the danger. Then he waited as the dragon wafted downward, close to the narrow ledge outside the caves. Qui-Gon chose his moment, then sprang off the back of the beast. He landed on the ledge, steadying himself with a hand

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against the outside wall of the cave. The dragon flew off with a soft confused cry, his mind released.

Qui-Gon had taken two steps toward the cave when he saw Obi-Wan race from its mouth, lightsaber held high.

Obi-Wan ran from the cave only to stop short. He stared up at the sky in horror.

At first, he'd thought it was just dark clouds. But now he realized that scores of dragons were blocking the sun. And they were all winging toward the caves.

Never in his young life had he imagined such terror. His legs went weak, and his mind was suddenly blank. He didn't know what to do.

Then he saw Qui-Gon heading toward him. Relief flooded him. The Jedi looked battered and bloody, and was holding one shoulder stiffly. Still, he was alive.

"Did you get the dactyl?" Obi-Wan called.

Qui-Gon nodded. "The Arconans?"

"Still alive, but barely. Go, Qui-Gon. I'll hold the mouth of the cave."

Obi-Wan expected Qui-Gon to argue, to send *him* back into the cave with the dactyl. The Jedi Knight merely gazed at him for a tenth of a second. In the Master's eyes, Obi-Wan saw respect and acceptance.

"I will return," Qui-Gon promised, and rushed into the caves.

In seconds, the dragons were on Obi-Wan. His lightsaber slashed and burned, sizzled and shrieked. Dragons roared in pain and fell before him. He was fighting better and stronger than he ever had, ever thought he could.

But he knew he could not hold the dragons off for long.

Qui-Gon raced through the caves, past Whiphid and Hutt guards, carrying his bag of dactyl.

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Such was the look of purpose in his eyes that no one dared to stop him. Instead, Jemba's guards cowered in fear, until Qui-Gon, halfway through the tunnel, met Jemba himself.

"Halt!" the enormous Hutt ordered. "Where are you going?"

Qui-Gon stared evenly at Jemba. "You had better get your guards to the mouths of the caves," Qui-Gon warned. "We're in trouble."

"Hah!" Jemba laughed. "Your foolish pupil already tried that trick!"

Suddenly a draigon roared near the mouth of one of the tunnels. The sound was astonishing. The cave trembled. Bits of dust shook loose from the roof.

"It has started," Qui-Gon said evenly.

He shouldered past the enormous Hutt and raced to get the dactyl to the Arconans.

Grelb squeezed between two flat rocks and lay for a moment, his heavy blaster in hand, staring down at the caves. He'd missed his chance to kill Qui-Gon Jinn. The big Jedi had already raced into the caves. But his pupil guarded the mouth of the cavern, lightsaber ready.

He wanted the Master, but the pupil would have to do for now.

Draigons hurtled from the sky by the dozens, converging on the lad. Even Grelb had to admire the young Jedi's skill. His lightsaber struck again and again, and the boy showed no sign of tiring. It was almost a pity to kill him.

Lightning split the sky. Rain pounded the stones over Grelb's head. One good thing about hiding under these rocks—at least it was dry.

He raised his blaster rifle and tried to aim at the young Jedi. The boy's lightsaber flashed among the draigons.

All I need now, Grelb thought, is one brief moment to pull off my shot. Just one...

Chapter Twenty-Two

The battle was like none Obi-Wan had ever imagined. He felt no fear. He had accepted his death. The odds were just too great against him. Now he only fought to protect the Arconans. He felt no anger. He did not hate the hungry beasts that dropped endlessly from the blackened skies.

The Force was his ally.

He could feel it moving him, moving through him, and through the draigons. He leaped and somersaulted. He spun and slashed through muzzles and claws. The battle became a dance of sheer survival.

As he danced, Obi-Wan changed. He felt subtle promptings he'd never felt before. He saw attacks before they came. He sensed the flail of a tail before it happened. The muscles of the draigons seemed incredibly defined, so that he could read tiny flickers of movement that revealed which way a draigon would turn. Dead draigons piled on the ground around him. He gave himself entirely to the dance.

After several long minutes, he began backing toward the mouth of the cave. He had an idea. If he could kill the draigons at the very mouth of the cave, the bodies would block the entrance. If enough entrances were blocked, they might have a chance.

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He fought his way back ferociously. He had just gained the entrance when he heard a familiar laugh.

“Well done, little one!” Jemba chortled. The enormous Hutt slithered from the shadows farther back in the cave. He held an oversized blaster rifle.

Obi-Wan barely had time to glance at the Hutt, for three dragons had gathered at the mouth of the cave.

“Help me!” Obi-Wan called to Jemba as he fought. It would be so easy for the Hutt to shoot the dragons. He could help with his plan. Obi-Wan knew he wouldn’t care to save him, but Jemba would certainly want to save himself.

“Of course,” Jemba chortled. “I’ll help you—to death!” He raised his blaster and aimed.

Grelb huddled beneath his rock. Dragons lay at Obi-Wan Kenobi’s feet. The boy stood with the mouth of the cave yawning wide behind him.

The Hutt chuckled softly. He saw his chance and squeezed the trigger on his blaster.

The bolt shot out—but to Grelb’s surprise, young Obi-Wan must have sensed it coming, for he dodged to the side. The bolt barely missed him.

Grelb shouted in rage and prepared to fire again. This time, he would not miss. But suddenly, he felt huge teeth rip into his tail.

He had been concentrating too hard. He had forgotten to keep a lookout. A dragon had found him.

He barely had time to cry out before the dragon yanked him from under his rock.

Obi-Wan stood panting. He’d felt the Force, had dodged as a blaster bolt came from nowhere and sizzled past his head. Perhaps no one felt as surprised as Jemba the Hutt.

The enormous Hutt took the blaster bolt in the chest. For the briefest moment, Jemba stared down at his wound in disbelief. “Well, ha!” he laughed in horror.

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His surprised eyes stared into Obi-Wan's for a moment. Thunder boomed and lightning flashed. Then Jemba slumped onto the muddy ground and died.

A draigon's cry wrenched Obi-Wan's attention back to his situation. He barely had time to thrust his lightsaber at the huge attacking mouth, then jump back.

"That was a little too close, I'd say," Qui-Gon remarked from behind him. His lightsaber powered up and glowed green. "I think you could use some help."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Together, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Qui-Gon Jinn fought side by side. The Force pulsed between them. They knew without speaking where the other would move, when the other would strike. When Qui-Gon moved forward, Obi-Wan sprang back to protect his flank. When Obi-Wan leaped to the right, Qui-Gon made sure he was covered from the left.

Clat'Ha joined them, a blaster in each hand and a spare strapped to her leg. Qui-Gon and Clat'Ha had worked quickly to administer the dactyl to the Arconans, and they had revived enough to stand together and fight. Si Treemba and a group of Arconans handled any draigons who dared to breach the opening.

Obi-Wan's plan worked. Draigon bodies piled up at the entrance, blocking it. Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon, and Clat'Ha left a small squad to protect it and raced to the next cave opening. Then the battle began all over again.

Before his death, Jemba had ordered the Whiphids and Hutts of Offworld Corporation to defend the cave where they had gathered. He instructed them to fire from the rocks outside the cave. It was a foolish strategy. Hundreds of miners had been slain. Finally, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon convinced them to fight at the cave entrance and use the draigon bodies as shields.

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The Offworld miners and the Jedi worked to guard the cave entrances, but dragons dug new entrances through the rock, so that at times they broke through and came at the miners from above or behind. That's where the Arconans came in handy. By evening, it was evident to every Hutt and Whiphid on that rock that the Arconans were not cowards. They were creatures born to caves and to darkness, and when it came to time to fight in their own element, they proved themselves to be ferocious and cunning.

No dragon that tunneled through a cave's roof caught an Arconan by surprise. Indeed, the Arconans were so fierce that the Whiphids and Hutts finally retreated and left them to finish the battle.

Near nightfall Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon were still battling at the last entrance to the caves.

Smoke rose from the dragons' mouths as they let out their piercing cries in the dusky air. But the cries had changed from war cries to signals. Suddenly, what was left of the flock roared and leaped into the air. The dragons circled the island twice, then flew off in defeat.

When a ragged cheer went up from the surviving Hutts and Whiphids, Obi-Wan thought that it was merely a cheer of relief. But when a huge Whiphid came out of the cave and gave him a rough pat on the back, and when Hutts actually circled him and began to clap, Obi-Wan realized that these were not cheers of relief. Their former enemies cheered for the Jedi.

And later, when he and Qui-Gon went into Jemba's chamber of the cavern and took the rest of the dactyl back for the Arconans, no one tried to stop them.

Because of Jemba's orders, over three hundred Offworld miners were killed in the battle. Eighty-seven Arconans had lost their lives. The caves filled with the Arconans' hum of mourning.

Obi-Wan lingered at the cave, watching his friend grieve with his fellow Arconans. It was time for Si Treemba to be with his

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people. Obi-Wan put a hand on his shoulder and pressed gently then walked away.

The miners' work force was nearly cut in half. While the Arconans grieved, Clat'Ha made plans for their future. She went to one of Jemba's chieftains, a Hutt named Aggaba, and said, "Aggaba, I want to hire you and your people."

"Which ones?" Aggaba asked suspiciously.

"All of you," she said. "You're temporarily the head of these men, until you reach Bandomeer. I'll buy out your contracts."

"And then what?" Aggaba asked. He had a cunning look in his eyes, as if he wondered how he might make a profit.

"I'll offer all of you an invitation to work for our mining company," Clat'Ha said. "We share the profits, so it's a step up for you. Think about it. When you get to Bandomeer, your bosses there will demote you, put someone else in over your head. This is your chance to escape from Offworld Mining, get decent jobs that will pay you better now, and in the long run."

Aggaba licked his lips and stared all around like a cornered Jawa. "Our contracts would not be cheap," he said. "I would want, say, two thousand per worker."

"Any money I give you," Clat'Ha countered, "would just go back to your corporate headquarters. So how about I make you a better offer. I'll give you twenty for each worker, and a personal bonus to you of twenty thousand just for signing with me."

Aggaba's eyes grew wide with delight. Clat'Ha hid her own glee. Aggaba would accept the deal out of greed. But the rest of the workers would have their freedom.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Qui-Gon knew when to admit he had been wrong. He had underestimated Obi-Wan Kenobi.

The repairs were almost done. They were scheduled to leave at dawn. Qui-Gon left the ship to take a last look at the great sea. He needed a moment to consider all that had happened.

The surf pounded the rocks around him as he gazed at the planet's five multicolored moons, already beginning to dim with the rising light. He thought about Yoda's words, spoken only three days ago: "By chance alone we do not live our lives. If take an apprentice you will not, then, in time, perhaps fate will choose."

Qui-Gon still wasn't sure if fate had appointed Obi-Wan as his Padawan, or if it had just thrown them together for one odd adventure. He'd thought it a coincidence that Doth he and Obi-Wan Kenobi were going to Bandomeer. After all, Yoda had sent the boy to Bandomeer, while Qui-Gon's orders came from the Senate—from the Supreme Chancellor himself! There was no way that Yoda and the Supreme Chancellor could have plotted this together.

But here it was.

Both of them were going to Bandomeer, and Qui-Gon had an uneasy feeling about this assignment.

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And there was a further matter. It was not a simple thing for one Jedi to touch the mind of another. It was an intimate thing, the kind of thing usually done between the closest friends. Or between a Knight and his Padawan.

For the first time in a very long while, Qui-Gon didn't know what to do.

"When the path is unsure, better to wait, it is," Yoda had told him many times. Now he would use Yoda's advice, even though he suspected Yoda would want him to take the opposite position. He would not ask Obi-Wan to be his Padawan. He would wait.

And he would watch. They had separate missions on Bandomeer, but he would keep an eye on Obi-Wan. One mission was not enough to test the boy. There would be more to come. Only then would Qui-Gon be able to tell how true Obi-Wan was to his Jedi purpose. Bandomeer would test him, for Obi-Wan was unhappy with the mission he'd received.

Qui-Gon smiled. He had to admit, the boy was no farmer. He was meant for different things. But whether his path would intersect with Qui-Gon's, he still didn't know.

Until he did, he would not choose. The boy would have to be strong to dispel the shadow of the one who had come before. And Xanatos cast a long, deep shadow.

Qui-Gon turned away from the rocky shore and headed back to the ship. Yes, he would keep an eye on young Obi-Wan.

And besides, he had a feeling that fate would give him no other choice.

Qui-Gon walked through the labyrinth of the ship's corridors until he reached Obi-Wan's cabin. He knocked on the door.

"Come in," Obi-Wan called.

The boy was sitting cross-legged on the bed, staring out at the mountain crags.

"I'll be glad to leave this place," Obi-Wan said by way of greeting. "I saw too much death here."

"You did well," Qui-Gon said. "I felt the Force move in you."

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"It was... astonishing," Obi-Wan said quietly. "I thought I understood its power. But I see that I had only glimpsed one corner of what it could do. For years, I thought myself worthy of it. But it was not until I recognized my own un-worthiness that the power began to fill me." Obi-Wan turned to Qui-Gon. His eyes searched his face. "Do you know what I mean?"

Qui-Gon smiled. "You are learning. And yes, I know what you mean."

Silence grew between them, but it was a comfortable silence. Always before, Qui-Gon could almost hear the pleading Obi-Wan was holding back. Now he felt only acceptance of Qui-Gon's feelings, and his own fate. Another victory for the boy. He was impressed.

"We should reach our destination tomorrow," Qui-Gon remarked. "I fear there will be nasty business on Bandomeer."

Obi-Wan met his gaze. The look in his dark eyes was troubled. Yet underneath it, Qui-Gon sensed his strength.

"I know," Obi-Wan said. "I feel it, too."

Afterword

Obi-Wan Kenobi had been raised in the Jedi Temple at Coruscant, a world teeming with people, a world whose every piece of land was covered by skyscrapers.

When the *Monument* dropped through the atmosphere of Bandomeer, he marveled at the jungles and plains, the broad expanse of empty land and wide sea. He'd never imagined that there could be so much wilderness on one planet.

The port on Bandomeer was a small building, a hangar that could barely hold a freighter the size of the *Monument*. Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon cautiously from the ship.

A planetary police officer was waiting. When he saw Qui-Gon, he hurried over. "Welcome. My offices will of course be at your disposal."

Qui-Gon nodded. "Can you tell me what this is all about? The Supreme Chancellor said that you requested my help—mine specifically."

"Perhaps this will explain," the officer said.

He handed an envelope to Qui-Gon, who tore it open and pulled out a folded note. As he read, Qui-Gon's face paled, and his breath caught.

Obi-Wan read over Qui-Gon's shoulder. It said only, *I have been looking forward to this day.*

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The note was signed by someone named *Xanatos*.

Book Two
The Dark Rival

Chapter One

K-7, Core 8. Core 7. Core 6. Core 5. Narrow. Pressure. Trapped.

"Yes, Qui-Gon. I can do it. I will do it."

He knows it is wrong. He must stop it. But he can't fight this power. He sees the broken circle. The circle that brings the past to the future, yet does not meet. He must make the circle meet. He must . . .

Qui-Gon Jinn woke with a start. As always, he knew exactly where he was as soon as he awakened. Dreams never hung on him, clouding his mind.

Even a nightmare had only served to sharpen his senses. The room was dark, but he could make out the edges of the window in the darkness. Dawn was near. He could hear Obi-Wan Kenobi's quiet breathing on the sleep-couch next to him.

They were quartered in the guest chamber of the Bandomeer governor's official residence. He had come to the planet on a routine mission that had suddenly turned non-routine, all because of a single line written on a piece of paper.

The message had brought the nightmare. He'd had the same one for three nights running.

Qui-Gon's hand fell to his lightsaber, placed so that it was in easy reach in case of intruders. Within the blink of an eye, he would be standing, ready to fight.

Jude Watson

But how could one fight a dream?

K-7, Core 5. What could the words and numbers mean? K-7 could be a charted but uninhabited planet, or a star system. But why did he have the sensation of being trapped? Who had said, “I can do it”? And why did he feel helpless rage against the words, why did he feel helpless despair as he heard them?

The only think that was familiar to him was the image of the broken circle. It filled him with dread.

He thought it was in the past. All of it. Then, upon his arrival on Bandomeer, he was handed a note. It had welcomed him to the planet, and it had been signed *Xanatos*.

Jedi are taught to value dreams, but not to trust them. Dreams can confuse as well as illuminate. A Jedi should test a dream much as he tests unstable ground. Only when he’s sure of his footing should he move on. Dreams can be random energy, nothing more. Some Jedi see things in dreams and others do not.

Qui-Gon rarely had the gift and preferred not to dwell on dreams. He managed to push dreams away in the daylight. But at night, it was harder. If only he could ban his nightmares, and memories. Then they would not be able to haunt him so.

He had been all over the galaxy, from the Galactic Core to the Outer Rim Territories. He had seen many things that pained him, and many things he wished he could forget.

Now his worst pain, his worst regret, had caught up with him at last.

Chapter Two

Qui-Gon was the one who discovered Xanatos, the one who took the midi-chlorian count and brought the child back to the Jedi Temple.

He remembered the look on Cion's face as his only son was taken from his home planet of Telos. Crion was the wealthiest man on Telos, but he knew, despite all his riches, he could not offer Xanatos what Qui-Gon could. He could not deny his son. Qui-Gon saw the heartbreak on the man's face, and he hesitated. He asked on last time if Crion was sure of his decision. Slowly, Crion nodded. The decision was final. Qui-Gon would take Xanatos to be trained as a Jedi.

If only Qui-Gon has listened more closely to his own hesitation. The decision the take the child would have been different. All of their lives would be so different. . . .

Qui-Gon swung his legs over the side of the sleep-couch. He crossed to the window and pushed aside the heavy curtain. He could just make out the mine towers in the gray light. The Great Sea of Bandomeer was a black void in the distance.

Bandomeer consisted of one huge landmass and one enormous sea, which divided the planet in half. All of it was owned by mining companies. There was only one city – Bantor, where the government's quarters were located. But even the city

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was dotted with mining operations. The air was a sheet of dull gray, filled with drifting black specks.

It was a desolate world. The majority of Bandomeer's mines were controlled off-planet. None of the enormous riches made it back to the native Meerians. Even the official residence of the governor was shabby and ill-furnished. Qui-Gon's fingers ran along the edge of the curtain. The fabric was beginning to fray.

Obi-Wan stirred in his sleep. Qui-Gon turned to watch the boy, but Obi-Wan slept on. Qui-Gon let him. Today would mark the start of their separate missions on Bandomeer. Although Obi-Wan's mission wasn't dangerous, it would test the boy. All missions tested Jedi skills, even the ones that appeared easy. Qui-Gon had learned that long ago.

He and the boy had just been through a dangerous and unexpected journey together. They had fought side by side and stared death in the face. Yet he couldn't feel close to Obi-Wan. There was still a part of him that hoped Yoda would call the boy back to the Temple for reassignment.

Qui-Gon forced himself to be honest. The reason he couldn't feel close to Obi-Wan was because he wouldn't allow himself to. Certainly, the boy had impressed him on the journey here. It had been a rough transport, filled with tensions. Obi-Wan had learned to hold his tongue and his temper in situations where Qui-Gon had been certain he would lose his calm.

But Qui-Gon knew that Obi-Wan was still too blindly guided by ambition and anger. Those were the two qualities that had led to Xanatos' undoing. Qui-Gon couldn't get involved in such a situation again. He knew how treacherous it could be to rely on an apprentice.

So he would keep his distance from young Kenobi. Soon Obi-Wan would be sent to observe the Agricultural Corps work on the planet. Thanks to mining, Bandomeer had been stripped of many natural resources. The great mines took up many square kilometers; when the land was depleted, the mine was closed and

left the area barren. It was no longer useful for farming. Food was shipped in from other worlds.

It was a precarious situation that the local government was working to change. It had plans to restore and reclaim the land and vast ocean. The Agri-Corps was helping in the endeavor by replanting large areas and enclosing them to form what the government called “Enrichment Zones.” Obi-Wan would be sent to the largest zone to help.

Qui-Gon’s mission was less clear-cut. He had been called on by the Jedi Council to act as a Guardian of Peace at the local government’s request. Qui-Gon still wasn’t certain of the specifics. Most of the people on Bandomeer were imported to work the mines. They worked, saving as much as they could in order to transport off-planet as soon as possible. That was why the government on Bandomeer had such trouble instituting change. Everyone, even the natives, wanted to leave the planet as soon as they were able. No one truly cared what happened the Bandomeer.

But recently, that had begun the change. The Meerians had become partners with the immigrant Arconans. The two groups had formed a cooperative mine. All of the profits were shared equally.

Some miners had already switched over from the main mines, owned by the mighty Offworld Corporation. Qui-Gon had a feeling that the reason he’d been called by the Bandomeer government was because of this. Offworld never took well to those who encroached on its turf.

The landscape outside was lighter now. Streaks of deep orange sun licked at the tall mining towers like tongues of flame. Still fighting the grip of his nightmare, Qui-Gon watched Bandor come to life. Lights came on in the narrow streets. Workers headed for the mines. Night workers wearily trudged home. Qui-Gon’s thoughts returned to Xanatos’ surprise message:

I have been looking forward to this day.

Jude Watson

The message had included a small drawing of a broken circle next to Xanatos' name – there was a gap where the ends should meet.

It was a reminder to Qui-Gon. A taunt. Xanatos had a scar on his cheek in that form. Qui-Gon meditated on the message again, letting all the possible implications come to him. He could be walking into a trap. Or Xanatos could be playing a game with him. He could be galaxies away right now, smiling at the idea the he made his former Master shudder in fear at the sight of his name.

That *would* be something Xanatos would do: confuse Qui-Gon, slow him down, make him interpret a situation badly, all because Qui-Gon assumed Xanatos was involved. Xanatos was clever, and often used that cleverness to concoct cruel games.

Suddenly. Qui-Gon wished the message had been a game. A childish taunt.

He did not ever want to meet Xanatos face-to-face again.

Chapter Three

Obi-Wan Kenobi woke, but did not stir. Keeping his eyelids almost closed, he stole a glance at Qui-Gon. The Jedi Master stood at the window. His back was to Obi-Wan, but the boy could tell by the tension in his muscular stance that Qui-Gon was brooding again.

Obi-Wan itched to ask what Qui-Gon was thinking. His mind had been jumping with questions since they'd landed on Bandomeer. What had changed Qui-Gon's mood from serenity to agitation? Was Qui-Gon going to include him on the Jedi's mission as Guardian of the Peace? Had Obi-Wan proved himself a worthy candidate for Qui-Gon's apprentice?

Since leaving the Temple only a few days before, Obi-Wan had been shot at with blasters and strangled by a Hutt. He had tangled with Togorian pirates, fought off giant flying dragons, and piloted a huge transport vessel through heavy laser cannon fire. But apparently, he had not done enough to impress Qui-Gon.

If only he could hold on to the serenity he had been taught at the Temple. He knew that as a Jedi pupil, he should accept what life offered him with calm. But his position was so maddening! He had completed his Temple training, but no Jedi Knight had

Jude Watson

chosen him as an apprentice. On his thirteenth birthday, it would be too late. And that was only three weeks away!

It seemed that his destiny was to be a farmer, not a warrior or a peacekeeper. Obi-Wan had thought he had begun to accept this, but it was hard. He couldn't help but feel a different path was his destiny.

Obviously, Qui-Gon didn't think so. Although Obi-Wan had saved the Jedi Knight's life, Qui-Gon acted as though Obi-Wan had merely done him a friendly gesture, like helping him fix a broken lock. Obi-Wan's loyalty and dedication were received by Qui-Gon with polite acceptance, nothing more.

Qui-Gon turned slightly, and Obi-Wan studied his profile. The Jedi Knight's worry and preoccupation filled the room along with the growing light. It had begun after Qui-Gon had received the note. Qui-Gon had passed it off as a greeting from an old acquaintance. But Obi-Wan didn't believe him.

Still gazing out the window, Qui-Gon suddenly spoke. "You should dress. It's almost time for the meeting."

Obi-Wan sighed as he threw back the light blanket. He hadn't moved one muscle, yet Qui-Gon had known he was awake. The Jedi Knight was always at least two steps ahead of him.

Why didn't Qui-Gon tell him what was wrong? Was it the message, or was Qui-Gon tired of Obi-Wan?

Obi-Wan wanted to blurt out the question. But one of the Jedi's most serious rules was not to cross-examine a Master. Truth can hold great power. Therefore the decision to share it must be weighed. Only the Master could decide on revelation or concealment, according to the greater good.

For once, Obi-Wan was glad of a rule that restrained him. He was afraid of the answer to the question he wanted to ask.

Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon into the governor's receiving room. He was surprised and encouraged that Qui-Gon has invited him to the meeting. Perhaps it meant the Jedi was reconsidering whether to take him on as an apprentice after all.

Obi-Wan was expecting a lavish chamber, but there was only a circle of cushions on a bare stone floor. Bandomeer could not afford to impress guest.

SonTag, the governor of Bandomeer, entered the room. Her silver hair was cropped in tufts in the Meerian style. Her dark gaze calmly rested on the Jedi. Like all Meerians, she was small. Obi-Wan towered over her. The Meerians' small stature made them great miners.

She held out both hands, palms up, in the Meerian way. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan repeated her gesture.

"Greetings and welcome," she said softly. She indicated the younger woman to her left. The younger woman's cropped hair was also pale silver, and her silver eyes blazed at them across the room. Although she was standing quietly, her energy seemed to send a vibration through the air. "This is Veer'Ta. She is the leader of the Home Planet Mine."

The Jedi greeted Veer'Ta in the same fashion. They had been briefed about her. She was fierce patriot who had been instrumental in forming the Home Planet Party. The party goal was to replant the once fertile fields of Bandomeer, as well as control its resources. The first step was to end dependence on off-planet corporations for financial support. To that end, Veer'Ta had gone into partnership with the Arconans in the cooperative mine.

SonTag indicated the cushions that the Jedi should sit on and took her own seat. Slowly, SonTag and Veer'Ta's cushions rose in the air so that they were at eye level with Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan.

"I've asked Veer'Ta to join us today because we are both confused by your presence," SonTag began. "Although we welcome you, we must admit we are surprised. We understand that the Agri-Corps has requested help. But we did not."

Qui-Gon looked startled. "But the Temple received an official request from the government of Bandomeer for a Guardian of Peace. I have the documentation."

Jude Watson

"I'm sure you do," SonTag said firmly. "But I did not send it."

"This is very strange," Qui-Gon murmured.

"Nevertheless, we are glad you are here," VeerTa said crisply. "we have our doubts that Offworld Corporation will allow us to operate freely. Let us just say that they corporation has a history of making competition disappear."

"I've seen how they operate firsthand," Qui-Gon responded. "I have to agree."

Qui-Gon's voice was neutral, but Obi-Wan knew how deeply the Jedi disapproved of Offworld practices. On the journey to Bandomeer, Obi-Wan had been shocked at how openly Offworld used intimidation, treats and outright violence to keep control of their employees. Jemba the Hutt had deprived a groups of Arconans of the precious substance that kept them alive. He offered a brutal choice: to work for Offworld, or die. He had even laughed in their faces as they grew too weak to move.

"Then you'll understand why we'd like to have a Jedi representative at our first meeting with Offworld," VeerTa said. "Your presence will ensure that everyone plays fair."

Qui-Gon bowed. "I'll be happy to contribute what I can."

Excitement rose in Obi-Wan. Obviously, the meeting ahead would be important. The future of a planet was at stake. Plus, since the Home Planet group was in league with the Arconans, he would probably get to see Si Treemba and Clat'Ha again. He'd made friends with both of them on the journey to Bandomeer. Surely, Qui-Gon would want him present at the meeting.

"My companion will be traveling to the Eastern Enrichment Zone," Qui-Gon said, indicating Obi-Wan. "Can you arrange transport for him?"

Obi-Wan barely listened to SonTag's agreement. Stirrings of anger began to flutter underneath his frustration. While Qui-Gon would be involved in saving a planet, he'd be watching plants grow! He would be a farmer, after all.

He'd held on to a hope that after their adventures reaching Bandomeer, Qui-Gon would cancel Obi-Wan's original mission. Obviously, Qui-Gon still didn't believe he could become a Knight. He would send him off to a farm before taking him as a Padawan!

Obi-Wan struggled with his anger. Master Yoda had told him that often anger wasn't about another person, but about himself. "Close your mouth and open your ears, you must," Yoda had said. "Then hear what your true heart is seeking, you will."

Well, right now his true heart was seeking to scream out his frustration.

Qui-Gon extended his hands, palms up, then flipped them over, palms down. It was the farewell gesture of the Meerians. SonTag and VeerTa repeated the gesture. Nobody seemed to care what Obi-Wan did, so purposefully, he did not acknowledge their parting.

Obi-Wan's lack of courtesy was a severe infraction for a Jedi pupil. But Qui-Gon didn't say a word as they walked through the residence halls and out the main door.

The air chilled Obi-Wan's flushed cheeks as he and Qui-Gon paused on the steps. Obi-Wan waited for the older Jedi to reprimand him. Then he could tell Qui-Gon how he wanted to remain in Bandor. He could line up his reason; he could argue that Qui-Gon needed his support.

"Those seeming not to notice you usually do," Qui-Gon said, looking out into the distance. "They choose no to show it. Or they have greater concerns on their minds. It is no reason for discourtesy."

"But I –"

"I see that your discourtesy sprang from anger," Qui-Gon continued. His voice was soft and low, as it usually was. "I will ignore it."

Angry words sprang to Obi-Wan's mind. *If you're choosing to ignore it, why are you mentioning it?*

Jude Watson

Qui-Gon looked at Obi-Wan directly for the first time. “You will not, under any circumstances, intervene in any situation regarding my mission, or take any action, without contacting me.”

Obi-Wan nodded.

Qui-Gon’s gaze swept the mine towers of Bandor. “Things are rarely what they seem,” he murmured.

“That is why I wish to –” Obi-Wan started.

“Come,” Qui-Gon interrupted sternly. “Let’s get your things. You must catch that transport.”

He strode off briskly. Obi-Wan followed more slowly. He saw his chance of being a Jedi Knight dissolved in the cold, gray air.

Chapter Four

Xanatos was not an easy student. Though he was very young when he left Telos, he remembered that he had come from a powerful family on powerful planet. He used the information to try to impress the other students, most of whom came from far less privileged backgrounds.

Qui-Gon was patient with this fault, he considered it a childish failing that would disappear with time and teaching. When they first arrived at the Temple, most of the students still missed their families and home planets. Many of them spun tales about their backgrounds or retold remembered stories. Xanatos really wasn't that different, Qui-Gon told himself. And he made up for his snobbery with a genuine desire to learn and an excellent aptitude for Jedi skills. When the time came, Qui-Gon chose Xanatos as his Padawan learner.

After seeing a simmering Obi-Wan off on his transport, Qui-Gon went for a walk. His mind mulled over the morning's meeting. Who had fabricated the request for Jedi intervention in Bandomeer affairs? If it was Xanatos, what was his reason? Had he lured Qui-Gon into a trap?

Qui-Gon pondered the questions, but came up with no answers. If there was a trap ahead, he couldn't see it. He could hardly confess to SonTag that he couldn't help because of a mysterious figure from his past who might still hold a grudge.

Jude Watson

The only thing he could do was proceed. The mission on Bandomeer was real. SonTag and VeerTa needed help.

SonTag sent word to Qui-Gon that the meeting with Offworld would take place at the Home Planet Mine. At the scheduled time, Qui-Gon headed out of his quarters. He found SonTag herself heading toward him down the hall.

"I'm glad I caught up with you," she told him. "We've changed the location of the meeting. I think it's better for both parties if we meet in a neutral place. Maybe if there's an official tone to the proceedings, everyone will be more polite." SonTag grimaced. "At least that's what I hope."

"I hope the same," Qui-Gon agreed. He shortened his long stride to match SonTag's.

In the receiving room, VeerTa stood waiting. She was wearing the gray-blue unisuit of a miner, along with an impatient look.

"This meeting is a waste of time," she told Qui-Gon brusquely. "Offworld will make us pretty promises and then break them."

"I'm here to ensure that they don't," Qui-Gon answered. He liked the fiery VeerTa. He hoped the meeting would go well for her sake, and for Bandomeer's.

The door opened, and Clat'Ha, the Human manager of the Arconan Harvest mining operation, entered. Qui-Gon greeted her with a bow. She returned it, her vivid green eyes giving him a warm glance. They had been allies on the ship to Bandomeer; he hoped they would remain so here.

They waited for several minutes, but the Offworld representative didn't show up. Since Jemba the Hutt was killed during the journey to Bandomeer, nobody knew who the new representative would be. Offworld's power structure was clouded in mystery. No one even knew who its leader was.

Finally, an annoyed SonTag gestured at the cushions.

"We might as well start the meeting," she said. "If they're trying to intimidate us, I'm not going to fall for it."

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Everyone took their seats. The cushions made height adjustments so that everyone was at eye level. Clat'Ha and Veer'Ta began to brief Son'Tag on progress at the mine. Qui-Gon heard their words, but he was distracted by something more important. There was a disturbance in the Force. He tuned into the disturbance, unsure of what it meant. The dark ripples were a warning, but of what?

The door suddenly flew open. A young man stood in the doorway. His shiny black cape was lined in a blue so deep it was almost black as well. A broken circle scar marked his cheek.

Qui-Gon's gaze locked with the intruder's. The moment hung suspended in the air. Then, to Qui-Gon's surprise, Xanatos broke into a delighted grin.

"Old friend! So you are here. I hardly dared to hope." Xanatos strode forward, handsome and commanding. His black hair flowed to his shoulders, and his dark blue eyes matched the lining on his cape. He gave the Meerian sign of greeting to Son'Tag, then bowed.

"Governor, I must apologize for my lateness. My transport was held up in an ion storm. Nothing was more important to me than getting here on time. I am Xanatos, the representative of Offworld."

Son'Tag greeted him, palms up. "I see that you already know Qui-Gon."

"Yes, I have had that good fortune. But I haven't seen him in many years." Xanatos turned to Qui-Gon. He bowed.

There was no mockery in the bow, Qui-Gon noted. Just respect. Yet he did not trust it.

"I got your message on my arrival," he said neutrally.

"Yes, I had heard you were dispatched from Coruscant," Xanatos answered. "Since I had just been appointed Offworld's representative, I knew we would meet. Nothing gave me more satisfaction."

Qui-Gon studied the young man. Sincerity rang in every word. What was going on?

Jude Watson

"I see you mistrust me," Xanatos said. His midnight-blue eyes beamed a keen look at Qui-Gon. "Your sense of caution hadn't changed. But surely other Jedi apprentices have left the path of the Jedi without your mistrust?"

"Every apprentice is free to leave at any time. You know that," Qui-Gon said evenly. "If they leave honorably, there is no mistrust."

"And so I left. It was best for me, and for the Jedi," Xanatos said quietly. "I failed to lead that life. Yet it isn't a source of regret. I was not meant to lead the life of a Jedi." Suddenly, he flashed a smile at SonTag, Clat'Ha, and VeerTa. "I value my training as a Jedi, but it didn't prepare me for the shock of reentry. I must confess that I went astray for a few years. That's the last time that Qui-Gon knew me."

Astray? Qui-Gon wondered. Is that how Xanatos thought of that time?

"But I've changed. Offworld has given me that chance."

Xanatos leaned forward, his gaze on VeerTa. "That's why I admire you, VeerTa. Offworld sent me to tell you that the company will not interfere with your project. A richer, more secure, Bandomeer is better for all of us." Xanatos touched his chest. "I admire your leadership, because I love my home planet, too. Telos is always in my heart."

He turned to SonTag. "Perhaps if Offworld donated ten percent of its profits to the Bandomeer reclamation effort, it would convince you of our sincerity?"

SonTag looked flustered. Qui-Gon knew that even ten percent of Offworld's profits was an enormous sum. Offworld had never given away any profits to a charitable cause.

The offer must be a trick. Qui-Gon didn't trust it. But he could see that Xanatos had reached SonTag and VeerTa. Only Clat'Ha still looked wary. But then, she had more reason to doubt Offworld. She had tangled with them recently.

Xanatos seemed to pick up on Clat'Ha's mistrust. He turned his penetrating blue gaze on her. "When I took my position with

Offworld, it was with the understanding that certain policies would change. I do not believe in plundering planets and leaving them behind when we have gotten everything out that we want. Our actions on Bandomeer will be the first demonstration of our new policy.”

SonTag nodded. “It’s a wise course. And Bandomeer will be grateful for your help –“

Suddenly a huge explosion rocked the room. VeerTa was knocked to the floor. Before the others could react, Qui-Gon was on his feet, lightsaber in hand.

Qui-Gon sensed the explosion had occurred outside the palace. He hurried to the window. VeerTa struggled to her feet and followed him.

At first, a large black cloud completely enveloped the view of the city below. Then the wind picked up, clearing the view.

A plume of smoke rose from a mineyard. Qui-Gon could see the rubble of a large building. One of the mine towers was down, and the other leaned dangerously. As they watched, it slowly tipped and fell, demolishing a shabby building, probably worker housing. Qui-Gon saw figures stumbling, running away from the disaster. There would be others trapped inside, he knew.

The sirens began, high-pitched and wailing. Beside him, VeerTa swayed, then gripped the sill to keep herself upright. “It’s the Home Planet Mine,” she whispered.

Chapter Five

“I didn’t start it.” Xanatos would say whenever a fight broke out between him and another apprentice. His blue eyes would blaze with sincerity and sorrow.

Like a father, Qui-Gon would always try to believe him.

VeerTa’s hand curled into fists. She let out a choked roar and threw herself at Xanatos.

Without seeming to move, Qui-Gon was suddenly between the two of them, holding VeerTa off. It would do no good to attack Xanatos. Qui-Gon knew firsthand how fierce and volatile a fighter he was.

VeerTa struggled against Qui-Gon’s iron grip. “You did this!” she spat at Xanatos. “You’ll pay for it!”

Clat’Ha moved to stand beside VeerTa. Outwardly she was calmer, but her eyes betrayed the same rage. “Of course they did it,” she said contemptuously. “It’s just their style. Cowards!”

Xanatos looked pale. “I assure you, Offworld had nothing to do with this. I’m confident that the facts will prove this –”

“Enough of your lies!” VeerTa shouted. She tried to spring at him again.

“Let us be calm,” SonTag said urgently. “VeerTa, we must go to the mine. They’ll need help.”

“Yes, the miners –“ VeerTa said. She rushed out.

Qui-Gon had seen the effects of explosions before. They were always terrible. Lives were lost, bodies maimed, spirits broken. Blood mixed with ashes and tears. He did not know why this tragedy seemed worse to him. Perhaps because the miners had carved the mine out of rock and earth. They had worked with no money and little hope to build a future they had struggled to even imagine.

They stacked bodies in the yard. Qui-Gon worked tirelessly to carry victims from the wreckage. Forty miners were trapped below ground. Rescuing them was a painstaking and dangerous process.

The explosion had been touched off in one of the tunnels. The main administration building was completely destroyed, as well as the dwellings surrounding the mine. It was dark before Qui-Gon and the others had finished evacuating the wounded to med centers.

At last, there was nothing more for them to do. Clat’Ha called him to one of the untouched buildings for food and rest. He joined VeerTa and Clat’Ha at the table, but they were too exhausted and sorrowful to touch the food.

“Our dream has died,” VeerTa said. Her face was filthy with dirt and mud.

“No,” Clat’Ha responded softly. “That’s what they want. We can rebuild.”

The door opened, and SonTag entered. She, too, had helped at the mine today. Her red and gold tunic was filthy and caked with blood.

“We have news of the cause,” she announced quietly. “It wasn’t Offworld. There was a mixture of gases in a sub-level tunnel.”

VeerTa half-rose. “Impossible!” she cried. “We have sensors...”

Jude Watson

“The sensor was inoperative,” SonTag said. “Strictly a mechanical failure. The engineers are certain of it.”

Clat’Ha and VeerTa stared at SonTag in disbelief. “So it’s our fault?” VeerTa asked numbly.

“I’m afraid it appears that way,” SonTag replied. “Could someone have sabotaged the sensor?”

VeerTa shook her head. “We have the mine under twenty-four hour guard.”

SonTag spread her hands. “Mechanical failure is one of the hazards of mining.”

Qui-Gon wasn’t so sure. Something wasn’t right here.

Just then, a knock came at the door. A miner handed a message to SonTag. She read it. Then crumpled it in her hand.

“Bad news?” Clat’Ha asked.

“No, just surprising,” SonTag said slowly. “Xanatos has offered the resources of Offworld to help rebuild the mine. Money, droids, anything we want. Plus, he’ll house any displaced workers in Offworld housing.”

“So he was sincere,” VeerTa said, surprised.

Qui-Gon felt disturbed at this news. If this was a trap, it was a costly, elaborate one. Were the stakes so high for Xanatos? Surely he wouldn’t go to all this trouble just to get revenge on Qui-Gon.

The site of the meeting had been moved at the last minute. The main building had been completely destroyed. If SonTag hadn’t changed her mind, they would all be dead.

Xanatos was playing a game. Qui-Gon only wished he knew what the goal of the game was.

He was sure of just one thing: when it came to Xanatos, games had no rules.

Chapter Six

Obi-Wan was bored. If he had to go on one more Spore Tour, he would scream.

He knew that Agri-Corps did important work. But why was he here?

In the middle of brown, parched earth, the Agri-Corps had constructed a giant dome. Surrounding the dome were scientific laboratories and worker housing. Entrances from the labs and the admin centers led into the dome itself. Everyone worked for the good of the planet. No outside interests were allowed to control research, and no profits were taken from any discoveries.

Obi-Wan would have found the operation interesting if it weren't for the fact that his tour guide, a Meerian named RonTha, was the dullest creature he'd ever met. RonTha was fascinated by such things as stem grafts and seed sprouts. He could talk about them for hours in his droning monotone. And he did.

The only bright spot was that Obi-Wan was about to be reunited with his friend Si Treemba, the Arconans he'd met on the transport.

Arconans were born in nests and raised in close communities. They didn't have a highly developed sense of individual self, and didn't often associate with outsiders. But Si Treemba had formed

Jude Watson

a deep bond of friendship with Obi-Wan. He had stood side by side with him against Hutts and Togorian pirates. Because of his decision to take Obi-Wan's side against the Hutt Offworld leaders, he had almost lost his life. Si Treemba had discovered his own individual courage along the way.

Obi-Wan headed for the admin center, where he was to meet RonTha and Si Treemba. He saw his friend waiting and hurried to greet him.

"It is good to see you again, my good friend," he said, clasping both of Si Treemba's arms. The Arconan had a strong, snakelike body with slender arms and legs.

"We are blessed to see you, Obi-Wan," Si Treemba answered. His large, glowing eyes were full of pleasure. Arconans rarely, if ever, used the word "I."

Clat'Ha had sent Si Treemba to monitor the Agri-Corps' dactyl research. The Arconans needed the yellow crystal to survive, and Agri-Corps was trying to develop a way to incorporate it into the food supply. It was unusual for one of his species to travel alone, but Si Treemba had become an unusual Arconan. Clat'Ha knew she could depend on him.

RonTha approached, consulting a datapad as he walked. "Today we are scheduled to tour the northernmost quadrant of the great dome." He told them in his usual drone. "We have many fascinating seed experiments to cover. Stay with me at all times, and do not touch anything."

RonTha led the way into the dome. The vast, enclosed place was lit by an artificial sun, actually an illuminated bank set high in the dome. Outside the dome was a vast brown wasteland, but here they were surrounded by rustling grain and grasses. Around them gardeners hurried to and fro, their arms filled with flats of baby plants, or seed dishes.

Dazzled by the light and heat, Obi-Wan and Si Treemba trailed after RonTha as he listed the many agricultural experiments taking place.

“With all this talk of food, we’re getting hungry,” Si Treemba whispered to Obi-Wan.

“We sure are,” Obi-Wan agreed. He swallowed as he glimpsed a grove a trees ahead. Large, golden fruit hung from many branches, close enough to pick.

A tiny monitor on RonTha’s belt began to glow. He switched it off. “I’m being called to the administration building,” he told them. “You’re free to wander about, if you wish. Just don’t go off the path. And don’t touch anything!” RonTha hurried off.

Obi-Wan eyes the fruit. “Do you think when he said don’t touch anything, he meant fruit?” he asked Si Treemba.

Si Treemba’s triangular head bobbed nervously. “Hard to say.”

“Probably not.” Obi-Wan looked around, then quickly swiped a yellow fruit. He tossed it Si Treemba, then got one for himself.

“We really shouldn’t,” Si Treemba said, biting into the fruit.

“Mmmffff.” Obi-Wan waved a hand dismissively, chewing.

The fruit was sweet and succulent, yet had a crisp tang. It was the most delicious fruit Obi-Wan had ever tasted. “We’d better find someplace private to eat these,” he said.

Just then he and Si Treemba heard footsteps. They exchanged guilty glances, their mouths full. With a jerk of his head, Obi-Wan indicated that they fall back behind the trees.

A group of gardeners came into sight, carrying baskets. They headed for the orchard.

“Uh-oh.” Obi-Wan whispered. “We’d better get out of here.” He didn’t want the mission to end with a disciplinary problem. He’d already had enough troubles on the journey here from Coruscant.

“Hey!” one of the gardeners yelled. “You there!”

Si Treemba began to choke and dropped the fruit. He tripped over it as he tried to run. Obi-Wan hauled him up and they dashed through the orchard, finally reaching a field. Obi-Wan yanked Si Treemba under cover of the tall grain.

Jude Watson

“We’ll have to cut through the field to get back to the main path,” Obi-Wan panted.

They ran down the rows, trying to find a way out. The field was much larger than they’d thought. All they could see was green, and the artificial blue sky above.

Finally, they burst out of the last row, Obi-Wan felt his feet suddenly slide into something damp and marshy. They flew out from under him and went flying. Si Treemba followed. Clots of dirt splattered their faces and tunics. They finally landed and slid into a huge pile of dirt.

“What’s that smell?” Si Treemba said, wiping a clot of dirt out of his eye. “It smells worse than a bantha on a hot day.”

“I think we found the fertilizer,” Obi-Wan groaned, pulling himself out of the muck. They surveyed their surroundings. Behind them was the field. Ahead was a blank wall.

Something about the wall bothered Obi-Wan. It was tall and seamless, and curved out of sight around the fertilizer pile.

He walked closer and placed his hands against the wall. The surface was cool, like metal. When he took his hands away, to surprise he saw, just for an instant, that his touch had caused transparency. It happened in the flicker of an eyelid, to quickly for him to see inside.

“What are you doing?” Si Treemba asked impatiently. He let out the Arconan hissing sound of anxiety. “Let’s go. This smell will kill us.”

Si Treemba hadn’t seen the wall flicker. Perhaps the Force was at work. “One moment,” Obi-Wan said. “I think this might be another way out.”

He felt carefully along the wall, watching as his fingers left a shimmering transparency behind. He’d never seen a metal with this quality before. Finally, he found what he was looking for – a seam. He traced it with a finger. It was a door.

Keeping his hand flat on the door, Obi-Wan felt the energy from the living things around him, the grain and fruit, the people, the rich, organic island that was the dome.

Si Treemba gasped as the entire wall suddenly turned transparent. They saw that it was actually an annex that extended back to the dome wall. Inside, Obi-Wan could see bags of fertilizer and cargo boxes of various sizes.

“It’s just a storage area,” Si Treemba said, disappointed.

It seemed innocent. So why had it been so well concealed? Obi-Wan pushed skillfully on the door. He heard a soft electronic beep, and it swung open.

Si Treemba hissed nervously again. His pale, luminous eyes flickered. “Are you sure we should go inside?”

“You stay here,” Obi-Wan instructed. “Keep a lookout. I’ll be right back.”

He stepped inside the space. Immediately, the walls turned opaque again. It was like being inside a white cube. He bent over to examine the labels on the cargo boxes. The labels were black triangular shapes that showed a red planet with an orbiting holographic spaceship.

Obi-Wan recognized it instantly – Offworld. He leaned over to read markings on the side of the crate. He moved from box to box, reading the descriptive labels. Explosives. Turbo-drills. Detonators. Tunnel borers. Biotic grenades.

These were mining supplies. But they were on protected Agri-Corps land. Agri-Corps was strictly forbidden to concern itself with any profit-making enterprise. Was someone here secretly in league with Offworld?

“Obi-Wan, hurry up!” Si Treemba called. “We stink! We want to take a shower!”

Obi-Wan saw a small box in the corner that he had missed. This one had no label, only a metallic icon that served as a clasp. It was a broken circle.

He had seen enough for now. Obi-Wan slipped past the boxes to the door.

“What is it?” Si Treemba asked.

“Some kind of secret annex for Offworld,” Obi-Wan said. “They’re up to something.”

Jude Watson

Si Treemba's greenish skill paled to a dull gray. "Here? But they're forbidden."

"Since when does that stop them?" Obi-Wan said grimly. "Let's get back. I have to contact Qui-Gon."

"You mean you're not going to do anything?" Obi-Wan demanded. Qui-Gon wavered in front of him in miniature hologram form.

"There is nothing to do," Qui-Gon said. "Did you say the wall turned transparent with the Force?"

"I've never seen anything like it," Obi-Wan answered. "Have you?"

Qui-Gon ignored the question. "The information is interesting, nothing more. There's no real proof that Offworld is interfering with Agri-Corps research."

Obi-Wan wanted to howl in frustration. "They shouldn't be here at all! I should return to Bandor. Offworld is planning something . . . something big. We need to investigate this!"

"There is no need," Qui-Gon said crisply. "Your mission is to report back on the progress of Agri-Corps."

"What about the broken circle on the box?" Obi-Wan asked urgently.

"Obi-Wan, follow your orders," Qui-Gon sternly replied. "If you find proof of wrongdoing, contact me immediately. Do not take any action on your own."

"Qui-Gon —"

"Did you hear me, Obi-Wan?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan murmured reluctantly.

"Now, I must go. Keep me informed."

The hologram wavered, then disappeared. Obi-Wan stared at the empty air where Qui-Gon's image had hovered. Once again. Qui-Gon had shut him out.

Chapter Seven

There was a time when the circle was not broken. There was a time when everything was as it seemed. When there were no secrets.

The broken circle. Had Obi-Wan mistaken it? Or was Xanatos involved in Agri-Corps?

He couldn't tell the boy. Obi-Wan would demand answers that Qui-Gon wasn't willing to give. It was better to keep the past in the past.

Besides, the boy must learn patience.

Qui-Gon headed for the Home Planet Mine. It was amazing how much work had been done since the explosion. The mine was scheduled to go back into operation in only a week. Offworld had followed through on its promise, and had given money and droids. They had already cleared away debris from the tunnels, and were working on shoring them up again.

Clat'Ha waved at him from across the yard. She was heading into the mine with her workers. She'd barely stopped to sleep or eat since the explosion.

Qui-Gon opened the door to the temporary office, a hastily erected metal shed. Veer'Ta sat at a monitor that recorded the details of the operation. When she spun around in her chair, he saw that her face was alight with excitement.

Jude Watson

“There is good news,” VeerTa said in a low tone that throbbed with excitement. “The explosion has done us a great service, Qui-Gon. It blasted deeper into the ground than we’ve ever gone before. We’ve discovered a vein of ionite.”

Qui-Gon was impressed. Ionite was one of the most valuable minerals in the galaxy.

“Do you know what this means? No one has ever found ionite on Bandomeer. Traces, yes. But our main resource is azurite.” VeerTa leaned forward, her gaze intense. “The Home Planet Mine will be the only source. The profits are potentially enormous. This can save the entire planet!”

“It is good news,” Qui-Gon agreed cautiously. It was one thing to find a valuable mineral. It was another to control who mined it.

“You already see the problems ahead,” VeerTa said shrewdly. Then we must keep this a secret. I haven’t even told the members of the board. Only Clat’Ha knows. If Offworld discovers this, then they will easily drive us out of business and grab the vein for themselves. The explosion blew up all the azurite we’ve already mined. Technically, we’re bankrupt.”

“What’s your plan?” Qui-Gon asked.

“Thanks to Offworld, we have money,” VeerTa said. “True, they gave it to us in order to buy our trust by helping us rebuild. But we can use it to mine the ionite. We just need a few weeks to get everything operational. Then Offworld can’t stop us.”

VeerTa’s face blazed with determination. Qui-Gon allowed himself to feel her enthusiasm. But at the same time, he wondered why VeerTa was letting him in on the secret. He waited, knowing there was more.

“Let me show you what we found,” VeerTa said, rising.

He followed her into the mine. She gave him protective headgear and led him into the south lift tube. “The K region is safe,” she assured him. “We’ve managed to shore up Core 6. We know through sensing devices that the new vein is below it. It’s a level we haven’t even dug to yet.”

K-7. Core 6. Startled, Qui-Gon looked at the instrument panel on the elevator. As they descended, the indicator lights clicked on. *Core 10. Core 9. Core 8. Core 7. . .*

The nightmare rose in Qui-Gon's mind with all its dark power. "Is there a Core 5?" he asked VeerTa.

She shook her head. "We don't have the technology to go that deep. It's too close to the planet core. Offworld has developed deeper core technology, but if we try to buy or lease it, we could tip them off. We hope to get enough ionite out of Core 6." The Core 6 light glowed, and the elevator stopped.

Qui-Gon exited the tube and started to turn left.

"No," VeerTa said. "The tunnel is completely blocked that way."

She hit a switch near the door, and lights set into the rock walls glowed. Qui-Gon could see now that the tunnel was narrow and low-ceilinged, with a hydraulic track that ran down the center. The tunnel curved to his left as was swallowed up by inky blackness. There was a pale, bluish cast to the light glistening off the blue-black rock, reflection the presence of azurite.

"Clat'Ha and I came to see the damage," VeerTa went on. "the lift tube in the north tunnel was damaged, but should be operational in a few days. We have to fix that first."

She turned right and led the way down the tunnel. A pile of rocks lay in their path, and a hole had been blasted in the tunnel floor. "The blast must have reacted with some gases below this level," she explained. "Here, the blast moved upward." She bent down and picked up a rock. She scratched it with a fingernail. Qui-Gon caught the glint of a dull silver glow. "Clat'Ha noticed this. We took it back to study. She had a hunch, and she was right. Ionite. We dropped sensors and saw how much we had."

"You're going to have to be careful," Qui-Gon said. "If Xanatos finds out —"

VeerTa nodded. "That's why we need you. We'd like you to join the board of directors of Home Planet. With you on the

Jude Watson

board, Offworld wouldn't dare try to undermine us. They'd have to go up against a Jedi."

Qui-Gon was already shaking his head. "Jedi are forbidden to take part in any profit-making enterprise," he said. "We can't profit from our protection. It's an unbreakable rule."

"But think of the riches you'd be entitled to!" VeerTa said urgently. "You wouldn't have to keep them for yourself. You could donate them."

"I'm sorry VeerTa," Qui-Gon said firmly. "I'll help in any way I can. But this I cannot do."

VeerTa looked disappointed. Obviously, she didn't understand the role of a Jedi. "I'll have to be satisfied with that, then" she said. Her eyes glittered as her gaze roamed the mine shaft. "It's all here. Our future. I only pray we will succeed."

"I will do everything in my power to ensure it," Qui-Gon promised. Something told him the task would not be easy.

Chapter Eight

Obi-Wan told Si Treemba about his conversation with Qui-Gon. The Arconan nodded, as if he'd expected it.

"Clat'Ha would say the same," he said. "We need more proof."

"Just what I was thinking," Obi-Wan declared.

Si Treemba hummed with nerves. "The last time you had that look in your eye, we ended up in a Hutt prison."

"Relax," Obi-Wan said. "We're only going to stake out the annex tonight. We'll go for a little stroll in the dome, then wind up there. What can go wrong?"

"Any number of thing," Si Treemba moaned.

Obi-Wan and Si Treemba stretched out flat between two rows at the edge of the field. They pulled a green tarp over their heads for warmth and camouflage.

"You might as well go to sleep," Obi-Wan said. "I'll take the first shift."

"If you're sure," Si Treemba mumbled. He closed his eyes. A moment later, he began making the snuffling sound Arconans make when they sleep.

Obi-Wan felt charged with excitement about the stakeout. After only an hour, however, his eyelids began to droop as well.

Jude Watson

He couldn't fall asleep! Maybe he could take a quick exploratory tour. That would wake him up.

He slithered out of the field and stood. Brushing himself off, he headed for the boor to the annex. He wanted another look at that sealed box with the broken circle on it. Something told him that Qui-Gon had recognized the mark. Maybe there was a way to ease it open without anyone knowing he'd tampered with it.

Once again, he used the Force to open the door. Everything was exactly where he had left it. He crossed to the box.

Just as he reached it, he heard a noise behind him. He whirled around and saw a hooded figure approaching. At first he thought it was Si Treemba, wrapped in the tarp. Then he realized it was a stranger in a shiny black cape.

"Who are you?" he asked. He felt the uneasy ripple of something dark in the Force.

"A friend," the hooded figure said. "Someone who was once just like you." He threw off the hood. His blue gaze was warm and friendly. "I used to be his apprentice, too."

"Qui-Gon's?" Obi-Wan asked suspiciously. "I'm not really his Padawan. And everyone says his Padawan died."

"Is that what they say?" the man asked. "Yet here I am. What else do they say?"

"That Qui-Gon's Padawan disgraced the Jedi," Obi-Wan said. "And betrayed Qui-Gon."

The man's eyes burned blue fire. "Is that Qui-Gon's story?" Then the hard lines of his face relaxed. "I was his Padawan. So I know what you go through every day, Obi-Wan Kenobi. I know what you wait for. His approval. His trust. But he keeps both from you. He keeps a skin of Ice around himself. The more you try to please him, the farther away he goes."

Obi-Wan said nothing. The words seemed to have come from his own heart. At his worst moments, it was exactly what he thought.

Xanatos looked compassionately at the boy. "Yoda praises him. The Galactic Senate depends on him. Everyone vies to be

his apprentice. But he is the worst kind of Master. He denies you his trust. Yet he demands everything of you.”

Obi-wan heard the words as if he were in a trance. *How true it is*, he thought. Deep anger stirred, anger that lay dormant inside him. He feared his anger more than any enemy.

“I am Xanatos,” the man said. “Did he ever mention me to you?”

Obi-Wan shook his head.

Xanatos gave a sad, rueful smile. “No,” he said softly. “He would not. It’s up to me to tell you what he did to me. How he built me up, kept me by his side, always with the promise that I would advance. Yet, in the end, he broke every promise. It will happen to you, too, Obi-Wan.”

Could it be true? Could Qui-Gon’s coolness hide the seeds of betrayal? Obi-Wan had felt the chill of Qui-Gon’s reserve, but he always assumed it was because Qui-Gon hadn’t accepted him. Did Qui-Gon’s secrecy hide evil, or good?”

“Why are you telling me this?” Obi-Wan asked warily.

“To warn you,” Xanatos said. “That’s why I came. You –“ He stopped suddenly. He held up a hand. “Someone is coming,” he whispered.

Suddenly, five security officers burst in. Obi-Wan saw the red planet patch on their uniforms. Offworld! What was their security force doing in the dome?

One of the men spoke into a comlink. “We found the thieves.” He said.

“No,” Obi-Wan said. “We’re just –“

But Xanatos had drawn his lightsaber. Obi-wan watched in surprise as Xanatos charged. Only Jedi carried such weapons. The guards drew their blasters, and Obi-Wan had no choice. In the blink of an eye, he had powered up his own lightsaber and joined the battle.

He felt the reassuring weight in his hand as he wielded the weapon, knocking a blaster from the guard’s grasp. He knew

Jude Watson

Qui-Gon would not want him to kill Offworld guards. It could make a bad situation worse back in Bandon.

So he fought defensively, while Xanatos became to aggressor, spinning through the air to deliver scorching hits. But he, too, seemed reluctant to land a killing blow.

Xanatos's Jedi skills must have been rusty. He allowed himself to be maneuvered into a corner. The guards advanced with blasters drawn. Obi-Wan leaped on top of a pile of crates and threw himself into the group, arms and legs scissoring in the air. Two guards went down firing, and he felt searing pain in his shoulder. Still, he was able to kick the third guard's blaster from his hand.

The guard suddenly produced an electro-jabber. He raised it against Xanatos as Obi-Wan raced to stop him.

Obi-Wan deflected the move with his lightsaber, but the electro-jabber dealt a glancing blow against his ribs. Blinding pain shot through his body. He reached out for the Force dizzily, but someone smashed him from behind. His vision turned gray and fuzzy, and he sank to his knees.

The last think he remembered was hitting the floor.

Chapter Nine

Now Qui-Gon could see his mistakes. He had been blind to Xanatos' faults. He indulged the boy. He gave without seeing. He was a failure as a Master, because he trusted his apprentice too much. He let his fondness blind him to what he should have seen all along.

After some reflection, Qui-Gon decided to ask Son'Tag and Veer'Ta if they had seen a box like the one Obi-Wan described. They had both visited the Agri-Corps Enrichment Zones many times. Perhaps there was a simple explanation for what Obi-Wan had found.

Qui-Gon described the box, and Veer'Ta nodded. "I've seen a box like that."

"So have I," Son'Tag agreed, thinking. "In the Western Enrichment zone. I was there just recently."

"I think I saw one in the Northern Zone," Veer'Ta added. "It was with the other equipment. I'm sure it contains Agri-Corps instrument."

It was exactly the response Qui-Gon had been hoping for. The box must not be significant. In the other zones, it had been in plain view.

So why was he worried?

Jude Watson

Maybe because it had been placed with Offworld mining equipment. Obi-Wan couldn't have been wrong about that.

Back in his quarters, he jacked into his data pad to investigate Offworld. He was curious about what position Xanatos held. His former apprentice had been uncharacteristically silent on that subject. If he was a high official, wouldn't he have boasted of his title?

Qui-Gon searched Offworld company records. He could find no mention of the name Xanatos. Which meant what? Either Xanatos had been lying about his involvement, or his position was a secret within his own company. But why?

Qui-Gon clicked a few more keys. The head of the company was anonymous, but a board of directors was listed. Qui-Gon recognized most of the names, rulers of worlds that were virtually controlled by Offworld. Figureheads.

There were no answers . . . yet. But he had an idea where to look for them.

It was time to pay a visit to Offworld Headquarters.

Offworld did not try to beautify their Bandomeer office. The building, a black, windowless block, echoed the grim mines that surrounded it.

Qui-Gon entered the center hall with its azurite-studded walls. The mineral was its only decoration. A Hutt security guard sat behind a black cube that served as a desk. His body rolled past the confines of the desk. He turned flat, dead eyes toward Qui-Gon.

"I have come to see Xanatos," Qui-Gon said.

"Move, wretch," the Hutt replied, bored. "Take your petty complaints to your immediate supervisor. There's no one here anyway. Xanatos is on an exploration trip to the northern mine quadrant." The Hutt reached for a blaster. So much for corporate hospitality.

Qui-Gon didn't move a muscle. He concentrated on the Hutt's greasy mind, pulling in energy from the Force.

“Perhaps I should wait in his private office,” he said.

“You should wait in his private office.” The Hutt repeated tonelessly. “Take the restricted tube to Horizontal Thirty.”

“Security controls should be lifted,” Qui-Gon said.

“All security controls shall be lifted.”

Qui-Gon entered the tube marked RESTRICTED. There was only one indicator light, for Horizontal Thirty. The lift tube reached the floor in seconds. He stepped off into a reception area. The chairs were made of stone. The cubelike desk was empty. He could see no door to another room, just a blank, empty wall.

A blank wall . . .

He placed a hand against the wall. When he took it away, he saw a brief flicker of transparency.

Obi-Wan’s description tugged at Qui-Gon’s memory. He’d read about the technological advances on Telos, the home planet of Xanatos. Recently they had been able to cover transparisteel with a special coating that rendered it opaque. When a thermoelectrical impulse was generated, the wall returned to normal transparency.

He pressed his whole body against the wall and it turned transparent. He could see the inner office. Still, where was the door?

Qui-Gon drew the Force in and Felt it move within him like a cresting wave. The entire wall became transparent. The hidden door swung open. As soon as he was inside, the wall was once more opaque.

It was a clever system, Qui-Gon thought, walking toward the enormous stone desk. Xanatos could control the transparency from the reception area. He would be able to see inside the office before he entered. If someone managed to slip past security checks, the intruder would be unable to hide in the office.

How like Xanatos. Concealing and revealing. He’d forgotten how clever his apprentice was about secrets. He would reveal something, leading you to think he had told you everything. But

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what he revealed was always trifle. He kept the most important secrets under his control.

The only piece of furniture in the office was the stone desk. Qui-Gon pressed a button, and a data pad rose from the top of it. He accessed the filing system. Just as he suspected, it was holographic.

The files rose before him. He flipped through the directory. There was a file on the Home Planet Mine, and he accessed it. It wasn't very helpful, just a list of money and droids that had been loaned after the explosion. He closed it.

Then he saw a file directory with no name. An icon hovered where the label should have been. Two broken golden circles that overlapped. Qui-Gon's heart beat faster. The two broken circles could be read as letters, too. O and C.

Offworld Corporation.

Qui-Gon accessed the directory, but a warning red light pulsed.

"Password, please," a voice said.

Qui-Gon hesitated. Knowing Xanatos, he had only one chance to get it right. And if he didn't, Xanatos had surely rigged the hologram to alert him that someone had tried to break in.

It was a risk. But he had to take it.

"Crion," he said, using Xanatos' father's name.

The directory flipped open. He scanned the list of files. To his dismay, they were all written in code. He would never have time to break it. And if he removed a file, Xanatos would know he'd been there.

But he'd gotten what he'd come for, anyway. Qui-Gon closed the filing system thoughtfully. Two broken circles had formed the initials of Offworld Corporation. Perhaps others would see that as a coincidence. But he knew that nothing was casual to Xanatos. Qui-Gon's instinct told him that he had found the person who controlled Offworld. Perhaps Xanatos had even founded it. But why would he keep it secret? *So he could maneuver more easily*, Qui-Gon guessed. Xanatos had always preferred

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stealth and trickery to achieve his ends. The question was : what was Xanatos after?

Chapter Ten

Qui-Gon was sure Xanatos was ready. He had spent years with the boy, watching him become a man. His mastery of the lightsaber was unsurpassed in his class. His ability to focus on the Force matched his Master's. He passed the preliminary tests with a near-perfect score. Qui-Gon was ready to welcome him as a Jedi Knight. It was a proud moment.

But Yoda was not so sure. Yoda said there would be one last test.

The holographic picture of Yoda rose before Qui-Gon. The transmission was clear. His heavy-lidded eyes blinked slowly, making him appear bored, but his long ears twitched. Qui-Gon had come to recognize the sign of the Master registering surprise.

"So Xanatos could be planning a great evil, you say," Yoda said. "That you have discovered this is good, Qui-Gon. Yet time to react, it is not."

"Bit I suspect he might be planning to take over Bandomeer," Qui-Gon protested. "This planet has no resources to fight. It must be prevented before it happens."

"But safety id your concern, is it not? Demand that you move slowly, that does. Proof of a plan you do not have," Yoda pointed out. "Read the files, you could not."

"I can read *him*. Xanatos."

"Ah, so certain, are you? Certain you always were about him."

Qui-Gon fell silent. In his quiet way, the Master had rebuked him. Yes, he had been certain about Xanatos. He had defended him against every gentle warning Yoda had given.

"You have pushed aside your past for too long, Qui-Gon," Yoda said, after a pause. "Running from it, you are. Yet you can run a little longer before you turn and fight."

"If you say, Master." Qui-Gon tried to hide his impatience. He struggled to consider Yoda's wisdom. It was never wise to dismiss his advice.

"Use Xanatos' tactics against him, you must," Yoda offered. "He plays with you. Play along for now, you will. Give him room to make a mistake. Slip he will. The trick is to wait for it."

"Yes," Qui-Gon said. "I see a path now." He began to sign off, but Yoda held up his hand.

"One last thin I have," he said. "A question, it is. Why do you leave Obi-Wan in the dark, Qui-Gon? He knows not of this, I think. Yet he is on the same trail you are on, in a different place."

"That's true," Qui-Gon admitted. "But there is no need for him to know yet. It places him at risk. I'm keeping him out of danger."

"The apprentice accepts the danger when the Master accepts the apprentice," Yoda replied.

"You forget," Qui-Gon said coolly. "I did not accept Obi-Wan. He is not my apprentice. We are on a planet together. There is a difference."

Yoda nodded slowly. "Trust is the difference. Easier you think, to change the past than the future."

Qui-Gon felt irritated. "That's illogical," he said. "You can't change the past."

"Not logical, yes," Yoda agreed. "Then why do you think it?" Still nodding, Yoda ended the communication.

Qui-Gon stood at the window, looking east over Bandor. As usual, Yoda had made him question himself. Why had he rebuffed Obi-Wan's efforts to help? And what if he'd placed the boy in more danger by not warning him about Xanatos?

Jude Watson

He had been wrong. Although it sometimes took him too long to come to that conclusion, once he did, he acted swiftly.

He activated his comlink and sent a message to Obi-Wan. Usually, the boy answered immediately. After ten minutes had passed, Obi-Wan grew worried. He sent a message to Si Treemba. No answer. He closed his eyes, gathering the Force. He felt it then, something dark, a void. Obi-Wan was in danger.

Someone pounded on his door. He crossed to it, already knowing it would be bad news.

Clat'Ha stood in the hallway. Her sleek red hair was awry, and her green eyes were full of worry.

"Si Treemba just contacted me with news," she said. "Obi-Wan has disappeared."

Chapter Eleven

With his eyes closed, he heard the sound of the sea. Or was it the pounding in his temples?

Cautiously, Obi-Wan opened his eyes. He was in a long, narrow room with a low ceiling. Rows and rows of sleeping platforms surrounded him. Bedding was rolled up at the foot of each wide platform. He was alone. His lightsaber was gone, as was his comlink.

His ribs and shoulder were bandaged. Something was around his neck. Obi-Wan ran his fingers around it. It was a collar. It felt smooth, with no obvious clasp to remove it. It hummed underneath his fingertips. Maybe it was some sort of healing device.

When he raised his head, a sharp pain made him release his breath in a hiss. Obi-wan breathed slowly, calming his mind as he'd been taught. He accepted the pain. He welcomed it as a friend, advising him that his body had been injured. He thanked it for alerting him to this. And he focused his will on healing.

After only a moment or two, the pain lessened slightly, enough for him to stand. There was a narrow window high above him. He balanced on a sleeping platform and stood tiptoe to see out of it.

Jude Watson

Despair filled him. A great gray sea stretched before him for kilometers. There was no sign of land. No ships. Only this huge platform, with tall towers rising from the sea.

He knew where he was at once – the Great Sea of Bandomeer, which covered half the planet. He must be on some sort of deepsea mining platform. The deepsea mines were only whispered about. They were rough, dangerous places that many miners did not survive.

“So you’re awake.”

Obi-Wan turned, startled. A tall, mournful creature stood in the doorway. His skin was dark, but appeared to be peeling in white patches. Two white circles surrounded his eyes. He had extraordinarily long, rubbery arms that dangled past his knees.

“How are you feeling? I was worried,” he asked, but before Obi-Wan could respond, he chuckled. “I lie! Not so!”

“Who are you?” Obi-Wan asked. He felt dizzy, and he commanded his mind to clear. He stepped down carefully from the platform.

“The name is Guerra, not that you need to know it so. I’m a Phindian. We’re a mixed lot, here. Which reminds me, Human boy,. Move.”

Guerra’s arm shot out suddenly. It reached across two sleeping platforms and fastened on Obi-Wan’s wrist. “I don’t have all day. The guards will be here with electro-jabbers for both of us if I don’t get you outfitted.”

“Outfitted for what?”

“Outfitted for what? A vacation on Syngia moon!” Guerra chortled. “Not so, I lie! Mining, of course.”

“But I’m not a miner,” Obi-Wan protested as Guerra dragged him toward the doorway.

“Oh, so sorry. In that case, you don’t have to work.” Guerra’s odd, patchy face leered at him. “Instead, you can be thrown off the platform. You’ll have such a lovely swim –“

“Not so?” Obi-Wan guessed.

Guerra chortled and slapped Obi-Wan on the back, sending him flying. “Good one, Human boy! Not so! Thrown off to drown. Except the fall will kill you first! Now, come along.”

Guerra pushed him through the doorway. A cold wind hit his face. Around him were piles of mining equipment. Droids were busy hauling beamdrills to a lift tube, where workers were waiting. Guards were everywhere on the platform, patrolling with electro-jabbers and blasters.

As they climbed stairs to the second level, Obi-Wan saw that the platform was much bigger than he’d thought, about the size of a small city. Hydrocrafts sped back and forth from the deepsea platforms that ringed the main structure.

Guerra pushed him into a storage room. He rubbed his eyes to survey the equipment, and the white patches around his eyes widened. Obi-Wan realized that Guerra’s skin was actually fair. He was covered with mining dust and grime.

Guerra caught him staring. “Showers once a month, but why bother? Soon, you’ll look like me, Human boy.”

“Guerra, I’m not a miner,” Obi-Wan repeated. “I’ve been kidnapped and sent here. I’m —“

Guerra burst out laughing. He slapped his knees with flapping hands. “Kidnapped? How awful! Let me alert the security forces! Oh, I lie again! How do you think I got here? Do you think I volunteered? We’re all slaves, don’t you see? At the end of five years, they give you enough to pay transport off-planet and start over. If you survive. Most don’t.”

“Five years?” Obi-Wan asked, swallowing hard.

“That’s the contract you sign,” Guerra said. “You’ll need a thermosuit. And a tech-helmet. Some tools . . .”

“But I didn’t sign a contract!”

Guerra laughed again as he held a thermosuit against Obi-Wan and rejected it as too small. “Stop distracting me with jokes, Human boy! Did I sign? They forge it so!”

“My name is Obi-Wan Kenobi. I am a Jedi pupil.”

Jude Watson

“Jedi, Kedi, Ledi, Medi,” Guerra said in a nonsense singsong. “Doesn’t matter who you are. You could be the Prince of Coruscant No one will find you here.” He tossed another thermosuit at Obi-Wan. “This one will have to do. So, now for a tech-helmet.”

Obi-wan clutched the suit against him. It was stained and damp. He couldn’t imagine putting it on. He was already chilled to the bone. His head pounded again, and he touched it carefully. He could feel the bruise on the back of his scalp. Blood matted his hair. His ribs were on fire.

The he remembered the collar. He touched it. “Is this some sort of healing device, Guerra?”

This time, Guerra fell back into the pile of thermosuits. He laughed so hard he began to choke. “So! You make me laugh again, Obawan. Healing device!” He hooted with laughter, then cleared his throat. “Not so! It is an electro-collar. If you try to leave the mining platform, ga-coosh!” Guerra’s rubbery arms waved. “You blow up!”

Obi-Wan touched the collar gingerly. “The guards can blow us up?”

“Not the guards,” Guerra explained cheerfully. “Electro-collars are activated on the mainland. Just in case of rebellion, you see. If we overpowered the guards, we might be able to dismantle the devices, got it? So the guards can’t blow us up, no.” Guerra smiled amiably at him. “They can only beat us and blast us and stun us and throw us overboard.”

“What a relief,” Obi-Wan muttered.

Guerra grinned, his teeth flashing yellow. “I like you, Obawan. So! I’ll watch out for you – ha! Not so, I lie again! I trust nobody and nobody trust me. Now hurry before the guards come and give us a stun.” Guerra poked him and made a sizzling sound, then laughed uproariously. “Don’t look so sad, Obawan. Tomorrow, you’ll probably be dead!”

Obi-Wan climbed reluctantly into the thermosuit. He grabbed the tech-helmet and strapped on the servo-tool belt. He had no

choice. Not yet. He had to figure out how to escape. Guerra said that no one had ever done it. But a Jedi had never been here before. He hoped.

Obi-Wan cleared his mind. He pushed away his fear and despair. He focused on the collar around his neck. Surely he could use the Force to override the device.

He concentrated hard, bringing the Force around him to bear on the collar. He used every ounce of his training and discipline.

But the collar still hummed with its electro-charge.

He was too weak perhaps. He would have to bide his time.

If he survived . . .

As he returned to the deck, he saw a guard viciously stun a miner who had stumbled. How could he survive this?

Play along for now, you will.

The word came to him clearly. Yoda's words. Just hearing the tones of the Jedi Master pushed the despair away and gave him courage.

Obi-Wan lifted his head. He was a Jedi. He would play along. And he would survive.

Chapter Twelve

“We have one last mission,” was all Yoda would allow Qui-Gon to say to Xanatos. “And then you will become a Jedi Knight . . .”

Si Treemba knew nothing. Clat’Ha told Qui-Gon that one minute Si Treemba had been asleep and the next, he woke up to find Offworld guards hustling Obi-Wan away. Obi-wan had been unconscious. Qui-Gon’s heart twisted at this news.

Si Treemba had not seen anyone resembling Xanatos. Still, Qui-Gon knew he had to be involved. He had been away from Bandor. Surely that was no coincidence. He’d heard from SonTag that Xanatos had since returned.

Yoda had told him not to confront Xanatos directly. But that was before he knew that Obi-Wan had been kidnapped. The rules of the game had changed.

Of course, he should contact Yoda with an update and await instructions from the Council. But he wouldn’t. He was tired of being played with. This wasn’t just a game. Xanatos was taunting him, daring him to risk open confrontation, and now he had involved the boy.

As an apprentice, Xanatos’ chief failing had been overconfidence. Qui-Gon hoped it still was.

Qui-Gon knew that Xanatos was overseeing the operation of Offworld's largest azurite mine on the outskirts of Bandor. He waited until dusk.

He watched Xanatos leave the small cramped administration building that served the mine and the adjoining smelting plant. The shifts had just changed, and the area was clear of miners. All the administrative workers had left. Just as Qui-Gon had hoped.

Slag piles rose around the yard. Offworld never bothered to keep the mining area clean of debris. The sky was dark gray fading to black. Yet the lights had not been turned on in the yard, probably to save money. Anyone arriving late for a shift would have to feel their way to the mine.

Qui-Gon waited until Xanatos had crossed the yard. Then he moved from the shadows of the slag pile into Xanatos' path.

Xanatos stopped. There was no surprise on his face. He wouldn't allow himself to show it, not even in a deserted yard at near dark when his oldest enemy appeared out of nowhere.

Qui-Gon expected no less. "If you have plans for Bandomeer, you should know I am here to stop you," he said.

Xanatos flung one side of his cloak behind him. His hand rested casually on the hilt of a lightsaber. Xanatos had broken a solemn rule by leaving the Jedi and retaining it.

Xanatos patted the lightsaber. "Yes, I still have it. After all, I trained for all those years. Why should I give it up like a thief, when I deserve to carry it?"

"Because you deserve it no longer," Qui-Gon answered. "You shame it."

A flush spread over Xanatos' face. Qui-Gon's comment had hit its mark. Then he relaxed, smiling. "I see you are still a hard man, Qui-Gon. Once that bothered me. Now it amuses me."

Xanatos began to circle around him. "We were friends at the end, more than Master and apprentice."

"Yes," Qui-Gon said, tracking him, moving with him. "We were."

Jude Watson

"All the more reason for you to betray me. To you, friendship is nothing. You enjoyed my suffering."

"The betrayal was yours. As was the enjoyment of suffering. That is what you discovered on Telos. Yoda had already seen it. And that is why he knew you would fail."

"Yoda!" Xanatos spat the word. "That knee-high troll! He thinks he has power. He hasn't dreamed of a tenth of the power I know!"

"*You* know?" Qui-Gon asked mildly. "How do you know such power, Xanatos? A mid-level manager of a corporation, sent to do the board's bidding?"

"I do no one's bidding but my own."

"Is that why you're here? Is Bandomeer a your of your abilities?"

"I don't take test," Xanatos snapped. "I make the rules. Bandomeer is mine. All I have to do is reach out my hand and take it."

He circled closer, his cloak swirling and brushing against Qui-Gon. "It's a tiny planet. Galactically insignificant. Yet it pours forth wealth into my hands. If you would only lose the tiresome rules of the Jedi, it would do the same for you. But no, Qui-Gon is too good. He is not tempted. He is *never* tempted."

"Bandomeer is not yours to own." Qui-Gon pulled an arm's length away from Xanatos. "You were always overconfident. You have gone too far this time."

"No." Xanatos' dark blue eyes glittered. He drew his lightsaber. "*Now* I have gone too far."

In a flash, Qui-Gon's lightsaber hummed to life. When Xanatos leaped to deliver his first blow, Qui-Gon was already moving to deflect it. The sabers met and sizzled. Qui-Gon felt the power of Xanatos' stroke move up his arm.

Xanatos had not lost his fighting edge. He had only grown more powerful, moving with economy and grace. His lightsaber flashed, he thrust again, always with a surprising twist or direction.

Qui-Gon moved defensively. He knew he would not be able to tire Xanatos, one method of Jedi strategy.

Xanatos had more than physical skill. Qui-Gon could feel the power of his mind. Xanatos was still in touch with the Force. He had gathered the energy of darkness, not light.

Qui-Gon leaped aside to avoid another blow. Xanatos laughed. It was time to change the rules of engagement. Enough defense.

Qui-Gon sprang at Xanatos, his lightsaber humming and flashing. He delivered one blow after another, which Xanatos deflected. Smoke and sizzle filled the air. Xanatos laughed again.

Qui-Gon used a slashing sequence of moves to position Xanatos against the wall of the building. But Xanatos leaped onto the slag heap and flipped over in midair, landing on Qui-Gon's other side.

"You destroyed everything I loved," Xanatos accused, his lightsaber barely missing Qui-Gon's shoulder, so close it singed the fabric of his tunic. "You destroyed me that day, Qui-Gon. Yet I was reborn. Stronger, wiser. I have surpassed you."

Their lightsabers tangled, buzzing furiously. Qui-Gon felt the charge in his arm, but didn't waver. Xanatos kicked out with a foot, but Qui-Gon was expecting it, and moved aside. Xanatos lost his balance. He almost fell, but recovered in time.

"Your footwork has always been your weakness," Qui-Gon said dryly as he dealt a blow to Xanatos' shoulder. Xanatos twisted away, but not before Qui-Gon saw him grimace with pain. "If you've surpassed me, it's only in your mind."

Perhaps it was the taunt. Perhaps it was because Qui-Gon had finally caused him real pain. Xanatos whirled the other side of his cape behind his shoulder. A second lightsaber was suddenly in his hand.

Startled, Qui-Gon lost his focus for an instant. There was only one person to whom that lightsaber could belong.

"And where is your new apprentice?" Xanatos sneered.

Jude Watson

So Xanatos had been responsible for Obi-Wan's disappearance. Now he knew for sure.

Xanatos faked a charge to the left, went right, then danced back to the left again. Qui-Gon remembered the move from the Temple. He easily blocked the blow.

He was fighting the past. His past. Perhaps he could defeat Xanatos, but the battle would not be won. Only the future mattered now. Obi-Wan was the future. The past would wait.

Qui-Gon paused, knowing Xanatos was ready to escalate the fight. Ready to deliver a death blow, if he could.

Suddenly, Xanatos whirled around, took three long steps toward the slag heap, and pushed himself off, flying through the air with both lightsabers slashing toward Qui-Gon, every muscle ready to drive the blow home.

He met empty air. Qui-Gon twisted away, grabbing Obi-Wan's lightsaber from Xanatos' unprepared grip.

Then, for the first time in his life, Qui-Gon ran from battle. He had to find Obi-Wan. The cold wind whistled past his ears as he crossed the mine yard at top speed.

He heard Xanatos' voice rise from the mist.

"Run, coward! But you can't escape me!"

"It appears that I have!" Qui-Gon shouted.

Xanatos' laugh was chilling. "Only for now, Qui-Gon. Only for now."

Chapter Thirteen

For two nights and two days, Obi-Wan struggled to use the Force to override his electro-collar. His wounds were healing slowly. His body was worn down by work in the mines.

The miners were kept in half-starved condition, but if anyone faltered, the guards beat them savagely with an electro-jabber. All of the guards were Imbats, creatures known for their size and cruelty, not their intelligence. They were tall as trees, with leathery skin and massive legs ending in broad, grasping toes. Their heads were small for their bodies and dominated by large, drooping ears.

Lift tubes took the miners below the sea floor. The small tunnels were hazardous. There were frequent leaks, and occasionally a tunnel would burst, drowning everyone inside. But what the miners dreaded most was a backflow of bad air into the tunnels. It was a slower death by suffocation.

"I've been looking forward to today," Guerra remarked as they waited for their turn on the lift tube.

Obi-Wan's heart dropped. Whenever Guerra was especially pleased, he knew he was in for trouble. Guerra dealt with the terrors of mining by treating it as a huge joke played on them all.

"Why?" he asked warily.

Jude Watson

"You there!" a guard shouted. Obi-Wan stiffened, but the guard crossed to a Meerian who had stopped to adjust his servo-tool belt.

"Stop holding up the line!" he bellowed, lashing out with the jabber. The miner cried out and crumpled to the floor. The guard kicked him aside. "No food for three days for that!"

Nobody tried to help the Meerian. They all knew that they would get the same treatment. Obi-Wan squeezed into the tube with Guerra.

"Today we go to the deepest sublevel," Guerra said. "Traces of ionite."

"What's wrong with ionite?" Obi-wan asked.

"Even traces of the mineral carry an alternative charge," Guerra explained. "Not positive, not negative, void. Sol! The instruments can go dead. If bad air backflow happens, no warning. Makes the work fun. Ha! Not so." His yellow eyes stared bleakly at Obi-Wan amid the white circles.

"Last week Bier's warning timer went dead because of high ionite concentration," another miner said. "He was in an aquasuit, out mapping the sea floor. Ran out of oxygen and didn't make it back to the tunnel."

Obi-Wan watched the indicator lights tick down their descent. He felt like a void himself. He had absolutely disappeared. He was deep under the sea floor, in a place where Qui-Gon would never think to look.

And even if Qui-Gon could trace him . . . would he actually save him? Xanatos' mocking words sang in Obi-Wan's mind. Would Qui-Gon betray Obi-Wan as Xanatos claimed he had betrayed his former apprentice? Would Qui-Gon leave him to die?

Obi-Wan thought nothing could be worse than the grinding hard work during the day. But at night, the guards loosened their controls. The miners needed some sort of outlet. Fighting was their amusement of choice. They had nothing to lose, and bets

were placed according to a complex system of how badly someone would be maimed. The night before, a miner had lost an eye. Obi-Wan learned to stay out of the way.

He left the miners' quarters and found Guerra out on deck. It was bitterly cold, but Guerra didn't seem to feel it. He lay stretched out on the metal deck, watching the stars.

"Someday I'll get back up there," he told Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan sat on the deck next to him. "I'm sure you'll make it, Guerra," he said.

"So! I'm sure, too" Guerra said. Then he murmured "Not so," softly under his breath.

"Guerra, you've been all over the rig. Have you ever seen a box with a broken circle on it?" Obi-Wan asked.

"So, sure," Guerra answered to Obi-Wan's surprise. "I just had inventory detail. They rotate the job so no one gets a chance to steal. There was a box like that in the explosives room. It wasn't listed on my sheet, but the guards told me to shut up about it. So I did. I'm not stupid!"

"Do you think you could get me into the explosives room?"

Guerra bounced up. "I hope that's a joke, Obi-Wan. You get thrown off the platform for stealing!"

"I'm not going to steal anything," Obi-Wan promised. "I just want to look."

Guerra smiled. "Great idea, Obi-Wan! Let's go!" He lay down again. "No so, I lie. I stick out my neck for nobody, remember?"

"What if I knew a way to dismantle your electro-collar? We could steal a boat and make it back to the mainland."

Guerra gave him a sidelong look. "If this is true, why does your collar hum, my friend?"

"I can do it," Obi-Wan said. "I'm waiting for the right moment." He knew that as soon as he recovered completely from his injuries, he would be able to harness the Force. He had to. "Trust me."

"I trust no one," Guerra said softly. "Ever. That's why after three years I am still alive."

Jude Watson

“Well, what do you have to loose?” Obi-wan asked urgently. “Just bring me to the guard, then show me where you saw the box. I’ll take all the blame if I get caught.”

Guerra shook his head. “The guard will never give up the keys. It’s against regulations.”

“Just leave that up to me,” Obi-Wan said.

“I need to do some extra checking,” Guerra told the guard. “I need the keys.”

The guard rose his electro-jabber. “Get lost or you’re over the side!”

Obi-Wan summoned the Force. He knew he didn’t have the power to alter physical objects. But he was counting on the fact that the small, limited mind of an Imbat would bend to his will.

“That might not be a bad idea,” Obi-Wan said. “We should check the supplies again.”

“Might not be a bad idea,” the guard said, tossing Guerra the electronic keys. “check the supplies again.”

Guerra stared at Obi-Wan. “What did you do, Obawan?”

“Never mind,” Obi-Wan said. “Hurry.”

Guerra led him to the explosives’ room. He opened the door and Obi-Wan hurried inside.

“Where’s the box?” he asked. “Guerra? Just show me and then you can go.”

Guerra paused in the doorway. His yellow eyes went wide. “I hear footsteps,” he whispered. “they’re running. It’s the guards! Must be a silent alarm on the door.”

“Come in and close the door!” Obi-Wan hissed.

But instead, Guerra began to shout. “He’s in here! I found him!” He turned to Obi-Wan sadly. “Even though I’m in danger, I would never betray a friend. So –“

“Not so,” Obi-Wan finished for him as the guards rushed in.

Guerra pointed, and the guard brought his electro-jabber down on Obi-Wan. Pain sent him crashing to his knees. He felt himself being carried to the lockup and thrown in.

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Penalty for stealing is being thrown overboard,” he heard a guard say.

“My shift is over,” the other one replied with a yawn. “Tomorrow morning is soon enough.”

Chapter Fourteen

The trip to Telos should have been uneventful. Yoda had found someone willing to transport them, a pilot ferrying a shipment of droids to the Telos system. From the first, tension sparked between the pilot and Xanatos. Stieg Wa was young, brash, and confident. He'd been on his own since he was a child and had prospered in treacherous adventures. /he good-naturedly needled Xanatos about being sheltered in the Jedi Temple and knowing nothing of real life.

Perhaps Yoda had foreseen the clash of personalities. Perhaps this was another test. Qui-Gon warned Xanatos to keep his temper, to not let the pilot's genial barbs affect him. Smiling, Xanatos assured Qui-Gon that he would.

The danger of the journey was crossing the Lander star system, known to be overrun with pirates. Stieg Wa was confident that they could slip through; he'd done it countless times. But when three pirate ships ringed the transport and warned Stieg Wa to surrender, he discovered that a crucial indicator light was faulty. The transport's cloaking system had malfunctioned.

Stieg Was, refusing to surrender, pushed the small transport, evading blaster fire in a stunning display of skill. After they lost the ships, Stieg Wa announced that the cloaking system had been sabotaged. He blamed Xanatos. Qui-Gon, of course, believed Xanatos when he swore he had nothing to do with it. Why would he risk pirates attacking a ship he was on?

Stieg Wa was out on the dorsal platform fixing the device when the pirates returned. He was hit by blaster fire and captured.

Xanatos led Qui-Gon to the escape pod. He had already programmed the coordinates for Telos. When Qui-Gon asked him why he'd taken such a precaution, he smiled.

"I always make sure I have a back door," he said.

Dawn was still an hour away when Qui-Gon strode off the transport toward the Enrichment Dome. The Meerian sent to meet him hurried forward. "I am RonTha. I'm happy to welcome..."

"Where is Si Treemba?" Qui-Gon interrupted crisply, striding toward the main building.

"H-he is in the dome, waiting for you," RonTha said, running to catch up to Qui-Gon's long stride. "But protocol must be followed. You must register with —"

"Show me to him," Qui-Gon demanded.

"But protocol —"

Qui-Gon fixed his gaze on RonTha. He didn't need to use the Force. The Meerian crumpled under the force of his irritation.

"This way," he said, scurrying forward.

A rustled of grain announced Si Treemba's presence. He sprang out of the field when he saw Qui-Gon..

"We've been watching since Obi-Wan was kidnapped," he said. "No one has been in or out."

Qui-Gon looked compassionately at Si Treemba. The young Arconan looked so tired Qui-Gon wouldn't have been surprised if he fell asleep on his feet.

"We shouldn't have fallen asleep that night," Si Treemba said. "Obi-Wan said he'd take the first watch. We should have stayed awake. . . ."

"Now is not the time to rethink the past," Qui-Gon said gently. "We have only the now. We must find Obi-Wan. What did you see?"

Jude Watson

"Not much," Si Treemba admitted. "A group of men in Offworld uniforms carried him away. We followed them, but we lost them in the dome." Si Treemba hung his head.

Qui-Gon tried not to show his frustration. Si Treemba felt bad enough as it was. But how could he find Obi-Wan on such scant information?

Suddenly, Qui-Gon noticed that RonTha looked very nervous. The Meerian was perspiring and looked as if he wanted to escape.

Qui-Gon turned his full attention on him. "Did you see anything, RonTha?"

"Me? But we're forbidden to be in the dome at night," RonTha protested. "Against all protocol."

"You didn't answer my question," Qui-Gon said politely.

"I try to follow the rules," RonTha said.

"And do you always succeed?" Qui-Gon asked kindly. He tamped down his impatience. "Anyone can be tempted to break the rules."

"The fruit is so good," RonTha whispered. "Just a snack before bed . . ."

"Tell us," Qui-Gon said firmly.

RonTha swallowed. "I was in the orchard when I saw them. A group of men carrying something. Someone led them. Someone in a black cloak . . ."

Qui-Gon nodded encouragingly.

"At first I just hid. But then I saw that they were carrying Obi-wan. He was under my charge! I was responsible for him. So I followed them to the sea landing."

Qui-Gon frowned. "They left by sea?"

He nodded. "Two of the men, with Obi-Wan."

Where could they be going? Qui-Gon wondered. The sea was vast, and there were no islands or reefs. "Did they say anything?" he asked.

"Nothing of significance," RonTha said. "Something curious, though. One of them said to Obi-Wan that he would see him in

five years, if he survived. Obi-wan didn't answer, of course. He was still unconscious."

"Five years?" Qui-Gon repeated.

"The deep sea mines!" Si Treemba exclaimed.

Of course, Qui-Gon thought. Where better to hide Obi-Wan than on a deepsea mining platform?

"Find me an Agri-Corps boat," Qui-Gon ordered RonTha.

"But it is against proto —" RonTha's voice faltered under the impact of Qui-Gon's icy glare. "Yes, immediately," he agreed.

Qui-Gon pushed the motor of the hydrocraft as high as it would go. He rocketed across the gray sea just inches above the waves. RonTha had been able to give him the precise coordinates of the mining platform, and he'd entered it into the boat's onboard computer. Besides, RonTha assured him, the platform would be too big to miss.

It began as a darker gray smudge on the gray horizon line of the sea. As Qui-Gon drew closer. The smudge formed into towers and buildings, a small city in the middle of the sea.

Qui-Gon focused a pair of electrobinoculars on the platform. He scanned it for any sign of Obi-Wan. Suddenly, he saw movement on the very edge. A group of men were pushing something . . .

Qui-Gon's grip tightened as he zoomed in on the sight. It was Obi-Wan! Guards were jabbing him with the dull ends of electro-jabbers, pushing him toward the edge of the platform. They were going to push him off!

Qui-Gon gunned the motor. It was already at top speed. In despair, he realized that he was too far away. His only hope was that Obi-Wan would survive the fall, and he'd be able to pick him up.

He raced across the flat sea, closer and closer. Obi-Wan was at the very edge. Qui-Gon's heart contracted with pain. To lose him this way! He would never forgive himself.

Jude Watson

But as he raced toward Obi-Wan, a movement caught his eye from a lower level of the platform. Someone had fashioned a kind sling out of a spun carbon tarp. He was tying it to the struts that supported the main platform. As Qui-Gon watched, two long, flexible arms shot out, positioning the sling in midair.

Obi-Wan fell. Qui-Gon watched the fall through the electrobinoculars. Obi-Wan's face was grim but composed, free of terror. Determined to fight to the last, but accepting death if it came.

Like a Jedi.

Then Obi-Wan saw the sling below. Across the distance, Qui-Gon felt ripples of the Force originating in Obi-Wan. He focused his own will to meet it, concentrating the Force, willing Obi-Wan's body to twist toward the tarp.

Obi-Wan seemed to grab on to thin air and pull himself to the left, shifting in mid-fall. He bounced onto the middle of the sling. In another second, those long arms shot out and pulled Obi-Wan to safety.

Qui-Gon was almost to the platform now. He heard the furious cries of the guards as they saw what had happened. They turned away, racing toward the lift tube to the lower floor.

Qui-Gon pulled up, bobbing in the sea as he quickly threw carbon-rope over one of the struts and tied the craft securely. The he threw another rope on the platform where Obi-Wan had disappeared. He tested it, then climbed up.

Obi-Wan was racing down the hallway with the long-armed creature. Suddenly, he stopped, as if Qui-Gon had called his name, though he'd said nothing. Obi-Wan turned to see Qui-Gon leap over the railing.

"I hoped you would come," he said.

Qui-Gon nodded. "Almost too late. Hurry."

"This is Guerra," Obi-Wan said, pointing to his rescuer.

"Bring him. The guards are coming," Qui-Gon said urgently. "They saw what happened."

Guerra's hands flew to his collar. "I can't leave. Neither can you, Obawan."

Obi-Wan looked at Qui-Gon. "It's an electro-collar. It will blow us up if we leave."

Qui-Gon nodded. He concentrated the Force on Obi-Wan's collar first. He sent neutral energy to the transmitter.

Obi-Wan touched the collar. "The buzzing is gone."

"We'll have to find a way to remove it on the mainland," Qui-Gon said.

"That's where the transmission signal is," Guerra explained. "The guards in the security office on the Bandor loading dock carry the transmitter."

Qui-Gon brought the Force to bear on Guerra's collar but wheeled suddenly. Behind him, the lift tube opened. Blaster fire zinged past his ear.

"You'll be needing this," he said to Obi-Wan and tossed him his lightsaber.

Two lightsabers hummed in unison as they turned to face the guards. The four Imbats hesitated. They had never seen such weapons. But, still infuriated at Obi-Wan's escape, they rushed forward.

Qui-Gon leaped onto the railing, somersaulted in the air, and landed behind them. Obi-Wan charged from the front. They moved in a graceful duet, advancing, retreating, forcing the guards back toward the lift tube and deflecting blaster fire with ease.

"More guards coming, Obawan!" Guerra yelled.

Fifteen guards shot out of the stairwell at the far end of the platform, firing as they ran.

"Time to go," Qui-Gon told Obi-Wan.

With a cry, Guerra crumpled, hit by blaster fire. He looked up at Obi-Wan. "Just a graze," he said. "Go. I'll hold them off for you."

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan pressed a blaster in his hand. “No, you go. Up the stairwell. And hide. In an hour, your collar will be deactivated for good. Trust me.”

Guerra smiled weakly. “I . . . trust . . . no one,” he said softly. But as Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon deflected blaster fire, he managed to limp to the stairs. Guerra turned. “Not so, Obawan! I trust you.”

Obi-Wan vaulted over the fallen guards, climbed onto the rail, and jumped toward the rope. He slid down and landed in the hydrocraft.

Qui-Gon followed. He gunned the motor. With blaster fire raining over their heads, they made for the open sea.

Chapter Fifteen

As soon as they were out of reach of blaster fire. Qui-Gon set a course for Bandor. Obi-Wan sat at his side, looking ahead. He did not know what to ask first.

“You said you *hoped* I would come,” Qui-Gon remarked quietly. “Not *known*, but *hoped*.”

Obi-Wan didn’t speak for a moment. “I need to know about Xanatos,” he said finally. “He told me you betrayed him. That he was your apprentice, and he trusted you.”

“Did you believe him?” Qui-Gon asked.

Obi-Wan paused. The wind blew his hair back from his face. “I don’t think you would betray a Padawan,” he said at last. “But I don’t understand why he hates you so. Does he have cause, Qui-Gon? Did Xanatos arrange to have me imprisoned on the mining platform just to get back at you?”

The Jedi Master nodded grimly. “Yes I believe so. It’s time I told you about him. I should have told you before.”

Mist had begun to rise on the sea. Obi-Wan could taste the droplets on his lips. Gray surrounded him in a whirling circle, silver-gray mist above, dull gray sea below. Qui-Gon’s words seemed to come at Obi-Wan from a past as misty as the surroundings, as far away.

Jude Watson

“Each Jedi apprentice brings something unique to the Temple,” Qui-Gon began. “Even at a young age, Xanatos stood out. His intelligence was fierce and quick and agile. He was a leader. I thought he was the most promising boy to come to the Temple in many years. So did Yoda.”

Qui-Gon paused. He made a small correction to the steering of the boat. “Yet Yoda had questions. As Xanatos grew and I took him as my apprentice, I resented Yoda’s hesitations. I thought Yoda was questioning my judgement. Of course, he was questioning the boy. He saw something that I did not. When Yoda suggested one last mission, I was glad. At last, I thought, I can prove to Yoda that I was right. Xanatos will prove himself, prove what I’d seen all along.”

Qui-Gon turned to Obi-Wan. “You see my failing here.” It wasn’t a question.

Obi-wan nodded. “I think so. What *you* could prove. What *you* wanted.”

“So it was a test for me, too,” Qui-Gon said. “I didn’t know that at the time. I let my ego and pride take over. My need to be right. It’s important that you know this, Obi-Wan. Even a Jedi Knight is still a living being, with the same failings.”

“We are not saints, but seekers,” Obi-Wan said, repeating a Jedi saying.

Yoda sent us to Telos, the home planet of Xanatos. Xanatos had not seen his father Crion in many years. In that time, Crion had grown in power. Telos is noted for its scientific research. Telosian scientists are brilliant innovators. Crion used their discoveries to create great wealth for the planet. And for himself. He built on his power and ruled the planet as governor. Yet he did not rely on advisors or his Senate. He ruled alone. Xanatos saw how powerful his father was. How luxurious a life he led. All of the riches of the galaxies were at Crion’s fingertips. Xanatos saw this, and a hunger began to grow in him. An anger. He saw that in taking him away, we had deprived him of a different kind of power. *I* had deprived him. He hated the Jedi for that.”

Qui-Gon stared at the mist, “We give up many things when we choose this life, Obi-Wan. We are destined to have no home, no measurable power. Xanatos had these things in his grasp. Crion saw his son weaken. He had come to regret his decision to let Xanatos go. He was an old man and had driven away every friend, every ally. So Crion urged Xanatos to join him in his great plans. I saw that Yoda sensed this would happen, that this was the last, great test.”

Qui-Gon sighed. “I did not doubt Yoda’s wisdom. I did what I knew I should. I stepped back. I did not attempt to guide Xanatos. He was ready to make his own choice.”

“He made the wrong one,” Obi-Wan said softly.

“Crion had grown greedy, as the powerful often do. He had secret plans to wage war against a neighboring planet. It was not enough to have the research. If Telos had access to the resources – the mineral, the factories – it could grow even more powerful. The treaty between the two worlds was automatically extended every ten years. This year, Crion called for a renegotiation. I found out later that it was a ruse, a way to delay until he could raise an army. I was to monitor the negotiation. Xanatos deliberately sabotaged the first meeting, according to his father’s direction. They wanted to enrage the population of Telos, you see. But I knew, and I revealed what I knew to the people of Telos. They rose up against Crion. But Crion did not retreat. Xanatos urged him to fight instead. They hired an army to put down the rebellion and stay in power. Civil war broke out. Suddenly, people were dying. The situation was out of my control. And all because I did not see clearly what Xanatos was capable of.”

Qui-Gon gripped the controls of the boat. “Xanatos led the army. The last battle was fought at the governor’s quarters. Crion was killed.”

Qui-Gon paused, his expression grim. “I killed him,” he said solemnly. “In front of his son I dealt the killing blow. My lightsaber sliced through the ring on Crion’s finger. As he lay

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dying, Xanatos picked it up from the fire where it had fallen. He pressed the hot metal to his cheek. I can still hear the sound of the burn. You can still see the scar.”

“A broken circle,” Obi-Wan said.

Qui-Gon turned to face Obi-Wan. His face was bleak, harsh with memories. “He said the scar would serve to remind him always of what I had taken from him. How I had betrayed him. The fact that thousands had died because of his father’s greed meant nothing to him. The weight of those deaths meant everything to me.”

“What happened?” Obi-Wan asked.

“He drew his lightsaber against me,” Qui-Gon said, his gaze shifting once again to take in the past. “We battled to the point of exhaustion. At last I knocked the lightsaber from his hand and stood over him. But I couldn’t deliver the fatal blow. Xanatos laughed at me. He ran out. I searched Telos for him, but he had stolen a transport and the treasury and had escaped into deep space. He disappeared without a trace . . . until now.”

Chapter Sixteen

Qui-Gon looked at the instruments. “We’re approaching Bandor harbor.”

“We have to get the transmitter,” Obi-Wan told Qui-Gon. “I promised Guerra.”

Qui-Gon nodded and headed toward the Offworld loading dock. They tied the hydrocraft and headed for the Offworld security office.

“Do you have a plan?” Obi-Wan asked.

“We don’t have time for a plan,” Qui-Gon said, kicking open the door. Three Imbat guards looked up in surprise. Before they could make a move toward their blasters, Qui-Gon’s lightsaber sang through the air. The three blasters clattered to the floor as the guards clutched their wrist and howled.

“Transmitters, please,” Qui-Gon remarked pleasantly. When they hesitated, he casually brought his lightsaber down on the power terminal. It sizzled and collapsed into a molten heap.

The three guards exchanged frightened glances. Then they threw down their transmitters and dashed out the door.

“It’s nice when it’s easy,” Qui-Gon remarked. He bent down and picked up the three transmitters. Striding back onto the dock, he threw two into the sea. Then he pressed the button on the third.

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“Guerra is free,” he said. “Now let’s see if we can get that collar off.”

Qui-Gon placed his large hands around the collar, searching for a catch or seam. He could not break the collar, or twist it apart. He set his lightsaber to low power and tried to cut it, but could not.

“I need a high power, and that would injure you,” he said.

“Or behead me,” Obi-Wan pointed out cheerfully.

Qui-Gon smiled briefly. “We’ll just have to find a way to get it off in Bandor.” He tossed the transmitter to Obi-Wan. “You’d better keep this until it’s off.”

Obi-Wan tucked the transmitter into an interior pocket of his tunic. “What now?”

Qui-Gon’s blue eyes gleamed. “Xanatos.” He said the name like a curse. “We need to get back to Bandor.”

Qui-Gon climbed into the driver’s seat of an Offworld security landspeeder.

He powered up the vehicle, and Obi-Wan jumped in. The landspeeder roared toward the city in the distance.

The sky was dark and low. The mining towers in the distance looked like spidery traces against it, growing larger as they sped toward Bandor. As they reached the outskirts, Obi-Wan saw a dot on the horizon.

“Someone is heading this way,” he said.

Qui-Gon nodded. He had seen it. Obi-Wan felt something dark in the Force. He glanced at Qui-Gon.

“I feel it, too,” Qui-Gon murmured.

Within minutes, a speeder bike was upon them. They didn’t need to see the black cloak to know who was piloting it.

“Han on,” Qui-Gon said. “I don’t think Xanatos is in the mood to chat.”

“He’s got laser cannons!” Obi-Wan shouted.

A blast from the cannon misted them by centimeters, sending up a shower of dirt and gravel.

“So I see,” Qui-Gon said.

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He wheeled the landspeeder sharply, turning to the right as another blast whistled past them.

Lightsabers were useless. They had no blasters. They had to rely on Qui-Gon's skill. Even as he drove, he gathered the Force around him, using it to anticipate the blasts.

Dirt and gravel flew in their faces as Qui-Gon swerved, dived, reversed, and hung stationary, all to evade the deadly laser cannon. On a speeder bike, Xanatos had greater maneuverability, and he used it to dodge suddenly around them, firing from the left. The jolt nearly sent Obi-Wan flying out.

"Hang on!" Qui-Gon called. He sped ahead, as low to the ground as he dared. He kicked up the dust underneath him, which blew behind them in a thick cloud, blinding Xanatos.

It bought them precious seconds, no more. Qui-Gon recognized the mining towers ahead. It was the Home Planet Mine. There would be friends there, weapons. Clat'Ha was a fierce fighter. She has saved his life once before.

He roared into the yard, but no one was there. Everyone was in the mine, working to repair it. There was no time to call VeerTa or Clat'Ha. Behind them, they could hear Xanatos roaring into the yard.

Qui-Gon jumped out of the landspeeder, calling on Obi-Wan to do the same.

Xanatos headed for Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan at top speed. Qui-Gon unsheathed his lightsaber and dealt Xanatos a glancing blow as he sped past. But the impact sent Qui-Gon spinning backward, and he felt his shoulder wrench in pain. They could not fight Xanatos while he was on that vehicle.

Xanatos turned and roared back toward them. They had no choice but to dash into the mine entrance. As they did, Qui-Gon had a sudden flash of chilling knowledge.

They were doing exactly what Xanatos had planned for them to do. They were playing his game.

Qui-Gon drew Obi-Wan back into the tunnel. It branched off in several directions, and he tried to remember which way

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VeerTa had led him to the lift tube. He let the Force direct him, take him over. He ran down the left tunnel, Obi-Wan at his heels. The lift tube stood at the end of the tunnel. The jumped in and Qui-Gon pressed the number of the deepest level, Core 6.

The glow lights hummed as the stepped out into the tunnel. Qui-Gon turned to the left.

“Where are we going?” Obi-Wan asked in a whisper.

“There’s another lift tube,” Qui-Gon explained. “It should be fixed by now. Xanatos wouldn’t know that. We’ll be able to circle around him to come at him from another direction, or even escape the mine. It’s better not to fight here.”

Obi-Wan nodded. It was always best to fight in a place where your opponent couldn’t drive you into a corner.

But that wasn’t the only reason Qui-Gon wanted to escape the mine. Xanatos had driven them in here for a purpose. They needed to foil that plan. A nameless dread tugged at Qui-Gon, telling him there was something here he would not want to face.

They traveled deeper into the tunnel. Qui-Gon frowned as he peered ahead. “VeerTa said this tunnel was completely blocked. Why—“

Suddenly, a shadow detached from the wall of the tunnel. Xanatos stood before him.

“You make so many mistakes, Qui-Gon,” he said. “It’s a wonder you’re still standing. First you deactivate the transmitter so that I’ll know exactly where you are. Then you enter time mine, which is exactly what I wanted you to do. And then you assume that I don’t know about the north lift tube.”

Behind him, Qui-Gon heard the hum of Obi-Wan’s lightsaber.

“Which one of you shall I kill first?” Xanatos murmured. “You, or your clumsy boy?”

Obi-Wan lunged forward fiercely. He leaped onto a mining cart, which rolled toward Xanatos. At the last moment, Obi-Wan sprang off. He flew over Xanatos’ head, striking down with his lightsaber as he did so.

Qui-Gon heard the flesh on Xanatos' hand sizzle. Howling, Xanatos almost dropped his lightsaber, but caught it with his other hand.

Obi-Wan landed safely behind Xanatos. "Don't call me clumsy," he said.

Whirling so quickly Qui-Gon barely caught the movement, Xanatos sprang at Obi-Wan. The boy leaped back, slashing with his lightsaber at the same time. Xanatos' attack missed him by a whisper. Qui-Gon was already charging forward, and Xanatos turned to parry the thrust. Their lightsabers tangled and locked, sputtering. Smoke rose in the tunnel.

Xanatos withdrew, leaping past Obi-Wan, and the two Jedi pursued him down the tunnel. As they ran, the floor beneath them sloped sharply. Qui-Gon realized that they were descending to a lower level.

Turning a corner, they just had time to see Xanatos disappear into a smaller corridor that led off the shaft. They hurried forward. The crosscut tunnel was narrow and dark. The glow lights here were set at a fainter setting. The ground dropped sharply downward. Xanatos was gone.

"Wait, Qui-Gon," Obi-Wan panted. "Are you certain we should follow?"

"Why not?" Qui-Gon asked impatiently. His lightsaber pulsed hot in his hand.

"Because he wants us to," Obi-Wan said simply.

"It's too late now," Qui-Gon said. He has chosen the field of battle, true. But we can defeat him."

Qui-Gon turned and ran down the tunnel after Xanatos. Obi-Wan followed. He would stand by Qui-Gon's side until his very last breath.

They were deep in the planet's crust by now, close to the core. The heat was intense. Qui-Gon saw a faint sign glowing ahead.
Core 5.

Veer'Ta had lied to him. Or else she had not known this tunnel existed.

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The tunnel opened out into a slightly wider one. The glow lights were brighter here. Immediately after they left the smaller tunnel, a hidden panel slid shut behind them.

They were trapped.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan slowly circled, their lightsabers held at the ready. There was no sign of Xanatos.

Then the lights went out.

The mocking voice came from out of the void. "I hope the two of you have time for a Temple exercise." Suddenly, in the darkness, the red glow of a lightsaber extended.

Qui-Gon didn't wait for Xanatos to strike. He moved through the blackness toward the glow. He could not see, he let the Force guide him. He could feel his opponent, feel the dark tremors of his evil. He struck.

"Missed me," Xanatos said. "I was always best at the blindfold test. Remember?"

Obi-Wan moved off to the right, hoping that between them, he and Qui-Gon could catch Xanatos in a classic pincer movement. But suddenly the lightsaber was moving through the air, slashing toward him. He jumped back just in time. He smelled the lightning in the air from the close call.

It was hard fighting now, driven by instinct and with only the Force to help them. Xanatos was a cunning, powerful adversary. He attacked and retreated in a furious rhythm, faster than any fighter Obi-Wan had met. Qui-Gon's grace and power were astounding as time and time again he met Xanatos with his thrusting lightsaber, protecting himself and Obi-Wan from blows.

Obi-Wan dived to the floor, hoping to slash at Xanatos' legs and get him down. But Xanatos sidestepped and somersaulted over him. He felt the brush of air as he went by.

Obi-Wan tried to push away his own anger and use the white light of the Force. His mind had been too clouded by anger. He needed to get clear. It was their only hope. He drew on the living Force to guide him.

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Suddenly, he saw Qui-Gon take a step back. His lightsaber flickered for a moment. Had he felt Obi-Wan's shift?

Obi-Wan felt Qui-Gon's Force energy suddenly flow into his, melding and pulsing in a white heat. Qui-Gon's lightsaber glowed green again, so bright it illuminated the shaft. Together, they sliced through the air, never stopping, moving, sliding, swerving. Xanatos was driven back, back, until they had him cornered against a tunnel wall. But suddenly the wall turned transparent, and a door opened. Xanatos sprang inside.

"It's a lift tube!" Qui-Gon cried, rushing forward. But the transparent door closed. Qui-Gon struck at it with his lightsaber, but the light only sputtered.

Xanatos' voice echoed through the cavern through some sort of amplification device. "It doesn't matter what you do now. The mine is about to blow. I've created the same conditions for explosion as I did last time. Except more so. Gases are mixing and will combust. I have enough time to get to the surface. You do not."

They heard the lift shoot up out of the mine.

The voice of Xanatos echoed in the darkness.

"Goodbye, my old master. May your death be as painful as my father's."

Chapter Seventeen

“The crosscut tunnel,” Obi-Wan gasped.

Together, they ran back to the entrance. But, as they suspected, it was sealed. Qui-Gon put his hands against it. It was coated transparisteel. In the dimness, it would look like a wall. The entrance to the tunnel from the main shaft would be concealed that way, too.

“It’s sealed,” Qui-Gon said. “And I cannot open it. Not with the Force.”

“Together, then,” Obi-Wan suggested. They concentrated, drawing the Force to bear on the door. It did not open, or even turn transparent.

“There is a stronger lock on this one, I think” Qui-Gon said. “Xanatos wouldn’t risk our being able to open it.”

“There has to be a way,” Obi-Wan cried in frustration. He struck the door with his lightsaber, but felt only a painful shock move through his arm.

“there is a panel here,” Qui-Gon said. He opened it. Several buttons glowed. He pushed them, but nothing happened. “Some sort of locking device,” he muttered.

“He said we didn’t have much time,” Obi-Wan glanced around the tunnel. “Qui-Gon, he said the blast will be more powerful . . .”

“Yes,” Qui-Gon answered. “And I’m sure he was sincere.”

The exchanged a look. Both of them though of the miners above, and Clat’Ha and Veer’Ta. Many lives would be lost. The dream of Home Planet Mine would die. Bandomeer would be lost as well.

“There’s only one thing to do,” Obi-Wan said. “I can get us out of here. I’m the only one who can.”

Qui-Gon felt deep unease stir within him. “What do you mean?”

Obi-Wan touched the electro-collar around his neck. “I have the transmitter,” he said. “I can reactivate it. If I push myself up against the door, the explosion should open it. You might have time to evacuate the mine.”

“But you’ll never survive the blast!” Qui-Gon exclaimed.

Obi-Wan reached into his tunic for the transmitter. “Stand as far back as you can,” he instructed Qui-Gon.

“No, Padawan. There has to be another way.”

“There is no other way, and you know it,” Obi-Wan said steadily. “Now stand back.”

“No!” Qui-Gon cried. “I will not! And I order you not to do this.”

“Qui-Gon, think of the many who will lose their lives,” Obi-Wan said urgently. “Think of what Xanatos will win. Think of Bandomeer. Our mission was to protect it. If I don’t do this, we fail.”

“This is not the way,” Qui-Gon said grimly.

Obi-Wan’s face was white and still. Determination tightened every muscle. “Yes, Qui-Gon. I can do it. I *will* do it.”

Chapter Eighteen

Qui-Gon was back in the nightmare. He felt the same horror, the same despair. The same sense that he must prevent this thing, even as he admired the sheer courage of the boy who had suggested it.

"I won't allow it," he told Obi-Wan. "I'll use the Force to neutralize the collar."

Obi-Wan shook his head, a small smile on his face. "You won't be able to. I know I can fight you and win. Maybe just this one time. But this time I'm right, are you are not."

Qui-Gon was taken aback. He felt the Force emit from Obi-Wan like a breaking wave. The power of it astonished him. He locked his gaze with Obi-Wan. Their wills slashed silently in the dark tunnel.

Obi-Wan pressed himself against the seal, holding the transmitter against himself. "Let me go, Qui-Gon," he said. "It is my time."

Desperately, Qui-Gon looked at the seal panel. He wanted to smash it with his lightsaber. Wanted to slam his body against the door. He could not let this happen!

He would not let the nightmare win.

The nightmare . . .

The broken circle glowed at him. Why hadn't he noticed them before? The Offworld secret logo was on the seal panel.

The circle that brings the past to the future, yet does not meet. He must make the circle meet. He must bring the past forward. He must . . .

"Wait." Qui-Gon quieted his mind, letting the Force fill him. He drew from Obi-Wan's power as well, concentrating on the broken circle. He envisioned the circle moving, meeting, becoming whole once more. The past would meet the future and create the present. That was what mattered. Xanatos was past. Obi-Wan was now.

Slowly, the separate strands moved, making a perfect circle.

The door slid open.

"I told you there was an easier way," he said to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan grinned in tired relief. Perspiration streaked his face from the heat and effort. "We'd better hurry."

They raced back up the tunnel, following the twists and curves to the main shaft. Qui-Gon remembered an emergency siren near the south lift tube. He activated it, and pulsating sound filled the tunnels.

"Evacuate," a voice said calmly. "Evacuate."

"That means us, too, Obi-Wan said, pressing the button for the lift tube.

But Qui-Gon hesitated. He glanced around the tunnel. They had been working down here to clear it. Boxes of explosives stood stacked against the walls. And one box rested on top.

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said. "Is that the box you saw?"

Obi-Wan turned. "Yes," he said. "but there's no time to find out what's in it." The lift tube arrived with a whoosh. "Let's go, Qui-Gon!"

Qui-Gon didn't answer. He walked over to the box. He unsheathed his lightsaber and, with great precision, cut the lock.

"He always had more than one trick," me murmured. "He always had a back door." He lifted the lid carefully. Just as he'd

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thought. It was an ion bomb, the most destructive explosive in the galaxy.

Obi-Wan stood by his shoulder. "He said he had mixed gases."

"He lied," Qui-Gon said. "This bomb is on a timer. And my guess is that all those boxes stored around Bandomeer are set to blow at the same moment." He turned to Obi-Wan. "The chain reaction will be enormous. The entire planet could blow."

Obi-Wan went pale. "Do you know how to dismantle it?"

"The Force won't work," Qui-Gon said, crouching. "This is a trigger so delicate that the Force itself might set it off. I can do it, but I need time. More time than I have." Qui-Gon bent closer. "This appears to be the master control. Xanatos must have set it when he left. That's the good news. If we can disarm this one, none of the others will blow."

Obi-Wan swallowed. "What's the bad news?"

"It's set to blow in three minutes," Qui-Gon said. "I need fifteen."

Obi-Wan felt seconds tick by, precious seconds, while he absorbed this. To have come this far and have Xanatos win! He could not let it happen.

"His hatred has led him to destroy a planet just to destroy me," Qui-Gon mused. "Not to mention a sizable fortune. Veer'Ta said the wealth of the ionite vein alone is immeasurable."

"Ionite?" Obi-Wan asked. "I though this was an azurite mine."

:"They found a vein after the explosion," Qui-Gon said. "The force blew rocks upward from the core." He gestured down the tunnel.

"Does the bomb have a clock?" Obi-Wan asked.

Qui-Gon nodded. "An ion clock. Precise to the second. Why?"

Obi-Wan didn't answer. He flew down the tunnel, toward the pile of debris. He picked up a rock and scraped a fingernail

against it. He saw the glow of ionite. He picked up more rocks, stacking them in his tunic.

“One minute left,” Qui-Gon called.

“We’re not dead yet,” Obi-Wan answered, running back to him. He placed the rocks carefully around the bomb.

“What are . . . ?” Qui-Gon’s question died on his lips. The digital readout had stopped functioning. “What –“

“Ionite,” Obi-Wan said. “It has a neutral charge. Makes most instruments stop dead. Especially times. Miners fear it, but now, it will save them.” He grinned. “You’ve got your fifteen minutes, Qui-Gon.”

Qui-Gon blew out a long breath. “Then I’d better get started,” he said.

Chapter Nineteen

Covered with grime, their tunics stiff with sweat, the Jedi wearily made their way to the governor's palace. There, they found SonTag in conference with VeerTa and Clat'Ha.

"There was an emergency evacuation at the mine," SonTag told them, frowning worriedly. "Yet our sensors show nothing wrong."

"We just replaced and double-checked them yesterday," Clat'Ha put in.

"And we received word that Offworld had a problem on their deepsea mining platform," VeerTa added. "The miners' electro-collars all malfunctioned. They revolted and abandoned the mine. Their leader – a Phindian named Guerra – said to tell you that he's okay."

Obi-Wan felt a glow of satisfaction. Guerra was free.

"Not that we sympathize with Offworld," Clat'Ha added. "It's a good thing. Those miners were slaves. But why are we all having sensor malfunction?"

"Equipment failure is not your problem," Qui-Gon told them. "I'm afraid I have a more painful failure to reveal."

Quickly, Qui-Gon told them what had happened at the mine.

"So Xanatos *was* behind the first explosion," SonTag said, grief in her face. "if only we hadn't trusted him!"

"I knew we shouldn't have!" Veer'Ta announced, her eyes flashing.

Clat'Ha simply watched Qui-Gon. "What do you mean when you say you must reveal a more painful failure?" She asked.

Leave it to Clat'Ha to jump to the next step, Qui-Gon thought admiringly. "Someone close to you has betrayed you," he said. "Someone was in league with Xanatos. They betrayed Bandomeer for personal gain and told him about the ionite."

Veer'Ta went pale. "But who would do such a thing?"

Qui-Gon let his gaze remain on her. Slowly, her paleness was replaced with a flush of color.

Clat'Ha turned to her. "Veer'Ta?"

"It was for the good of Bandomeer!" Veer'Ta cried. "That's what he told me. If Offworld was secretly behind the Home Planet Mine, it would be sure to be profitable."

"Did you really think that he would allow us to own the mine?" Clat'Ha asked her furiously.

"There is something else," Qui-Gon said. "Xanatos had a back-up plan. He wanted to blow up most of Bandomeer. Those black boxes were planted next to explosive is all the Enrichment Zones, plus the mining platforms. Somebody helped him smuggle those boxes into the domes."

"He said it was mining equipment for future operations," Veer'Ta whispered.

"Bandomeer was almost destroyed," Son'Tag said, her voice as sharp as the edge of a vibro-blade. "If it weren't for the Jedi . . ."

"There was no way I could have known!" Veer'Ta cried. "Why would Xanatos destroy Bandomeer? He would destroy his own profits!"

Qui-Gon said nothing. He knew that if there was one thing stronger than greed, it was revenge. Xanatos had plotted for this very day. He had used Veer'Ta. He knew that Qui-Gon would die knowing he had been unable to save countless lives. It was the most painful death Xanatos could arrange for him.

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Qui-Gon had underestimated Xanatos once again. He had not realized that his former apprentice was just as much a slave to the past as he was.

No, Qui-Gon corrected. His own past would no longer hold him hostage. He would leave it on Bandomeer.

Clat'Ha rose and moved away stiffly, as if she couldn't breathe the same air as Veer'Ta. "Where is Xanatos now?" she asked Qui-Gon.

"He has escaped," Obi-Wan reported. "His plans were already arranged; he thought he would be leaving a destroyed planet."

"Perhaps he is at Offworld's home base," Veer'Ta said.

Clat'Ha shook her head in disgust. "No one knows where that is. Mark this, Veer'Ta. You will pay for your crimes. Your friend will not."

"Yes," Qui-Gon said softly, "he will."

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan returned to their chamber to gather their belongings. There was a transport ship leaving in a few hours.

"Yoda has another mission for us," Qui-Gon explained to Obi-Wan.

Us, Obi-Wan felt a thrill at the word.

Qui-Gon stood unmoving, staring down at his sleep-couch. A piece of paper had been stabbed to the cushion with a vibro-shiv. Obi-Wan crossed the room to read over Qui-Gon's broad shoulder:

If you are reading this, I suppose I underestimated you. I won't next time. I enjoyed our adventure together, Master. I am certain you will have the pleasure of meeting me again.

Obi-Wan couldn't read his Master's features. He tested the Force, searching for the waves of Qui-Gon's anger. He felt nothing. Was Qui-Gon containing his anger, shielding Obi-Wan, once again, from his emotions?

"I'm not angry, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said. "Xanatos is gone from me. He is just another enemy now. The hate is all on his

side. I am prepared to fight the evil he does. He may kill me one day, but he will never wound me again.”

Qui-Gon turned. “You showed me this. In the mine, when you reached out with the Force and showed me how light can always battle dark. My anger left me. In the end, you taught me something about myself. And when the Padawan teaches a Master in turn, the partnership is right.”

“You called me Padawan in the mine,” Obi-Wan said hopefully.

“You would have died for me,” Qui-Gon said. “Your courage is extraordinary, even for a Jedi. I would be honored to accept you as my Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

Obi-Wan felt warmth fill him. He didn’t feel the pride he thought he’d feel, hearing those words. But the Force moved around him, and he felt a deep sense of home. He swallowed. “I accept, Master Qui-Gon Jinn.”

“Of course,” Qui-Gon added, “you would not have succeeded with your plan. I would have stopped you from dying on me.”

“You would not have been able to, Master” Obi-Wan replied serenely.

The exchanged a look, half-challenge, half-amusement. The Force pulsed between them. Both of them saw ahead to the long years and many missions to come. They knew they would debate this over those years, even as the memory of a planet called Bandomeer had faded. It would be a friendly disagreement between them, a bond of history and trust.

They smiled in recognition. Shared thought was one of the first bonding steps between a Master and Padawan. It let them know they were on a path together. They would stride toward a future, forged from their shared past.

Qui-Gon put a hand on Obi-Wan’s shoulder and rested it there.

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“We’d better go pack,” he said quietly. “We have a long way to go.”

Book Three
The Hidden Past

Chapter One

The market place in the city of Bandor was bustling as Obi-Wan Kenobi strode through it. He would have liked to stop to buy a piece of muja fruit, but Qui-Gon Jinn's steps never flagged. Obi-Wan's Master moved through the crowded streets with movements as fluid as a river. Without seeming to dodge or weave, he created a path with the least amount of energy. Obi-Wan felt like a clumsy sandcrawler next to a graceful starfighter.

He was careful to keep up. He was about to leave on his first mission with Qui-Gon. The Jedi Knight had been reluctant to take Obi-Wan as his apprentice. Even though they had been through battles and adventures together, Qui-Gon had been hesitant. Only with their last adventure, facing death deep in the mining tunnels of Bandor together, had Qui-Gon made the decision to accept him as his apprentice.

Obi-Wan was still unsure of his master's feelings about him. Qui-Gon was a quiet man who didn't share his thoughts until necessary. Obi-Wan knew little about the mission ahead. He would have to find the patience to wait until Qui-Gon told him the details. Meanwhile, he had a crucial question burning on his lips, one that he did not dare ask: Did Qui-Gon know that today was his birthday?

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Today he was thirteen. This birthday was an important occasion for a Jedi apprentice. He was now officially a Padawan. Traditionally, this birthday was not marked by a celebration, but observed quietly, with reflection and meditation. Obi-Wan was aware that as part of the tradition he would receive a meaningful gift from his Master.

Qui-Gon had not mentioned it this morning. Not as they ate, or prepared for the journey, or walked to the landing platform. Qui-Gon had barely spoken three words. Had he forgotten? Did he know? Obi-Wan was longing to remind Qui-Gon, but their relationship was too new. He wouldn't want his Master to think of him as greedy or self-important, or even worse, a nag.

Surely Yoda would have told Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan knew that the two Jedi Masters were in constant contact. Or perhaps the mission ahead was so important that Yoda had forgotten, too.

She skirted the last vendor, cut down an alleyway, and arrived at the landing platform. The Governor of Bandomeer had arranged a transport for them in gratitude for their work. She'd found a small trading vessel willing to take them on the journey to the planet of Gala. Obi-Wan knew that once they got on the ship, the talk would center on the mission ahead. Should he tell Qui-Gon it was his birthday now?

Ahead, a tall, gangly pilot loaded transport boxes onto his ship. Obi-Wan recognized the long, flexible arms of the Phindar. Obi-Wan quickened his pace to reach him, but Qui-Gon put a hand on his shoulder.

"Close your eyes, Obi-Wan," he instructed.

Obi-Wan groaned inwardly. *Not now!* He begged. He knew that Qui-Gon was about to drill him on a classic Jedi exercise: Attention to the Moment Gives Knowledge. At the Temple, Obi-Wan had always done well with the exercise. But he'd been distracted this morning, and could barely remember anything except his own birthday.

"What do you see?" Qui-Gon asked.

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Eyes closed, Obi-Wan gathered his thoughts as though they had been feathers in a windstorm. He plucked observations out of the air, remembering things his eyes had registered but his mind had not.

“Small transport with one deep scratch in right flank, several dents on the underside of cockpit. Phindian pilot with flight cap, goggles, and dirty fingernails. Twelve cargo boxes ready to be loaded, one flight bag, one medpac . . .”

“The hanger,” Qui-Gon prompted gently.

“One stone overhang with three docking bays. Cracks running vertically down the stone, a green vine trying to grow three meters down from the ceiling on the left, with one purple flower four meter down –“

“Six meters,” Qui-Gon corrected sternly. “Open your eyes, Obi-Wan.”

His eyes flew open. Qui-Gon’s piercing blue gaze studied him, making him feel, as always, as though his lightsaber was dragging on the ground, or his tunic was stained.

“Are you distracted by something, Obi-Wan?” Qui-Gon asked.

“My first official mission, Master,” Obi-Wan said. “I want to do well.”

“You will do what you will do.” Qui-Gon responded neutrally. He waited, his eyes never leaving Obi-Wan’s face. It was forbidden for an apprentice to lie to a Master, to conceal the truth, or even shade it.

Obi-Wan willed his feet not to shift and his eyes to remain steady on Qui-Gon’s. “Perhaps I’m distracted by something more personal, Master.”

A gleam of amusement suddenly lit Qui-Gon’s eyes. “Ah. A birthday, perhaps?”

Obi-Wan nodded, a grin escaping.

“You would be expecting your gift, then” Qui-Gon frowned. He had forgotten, after all! But after only a moment, he reached

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into the pocket of his tunic. His large, strong hand emerged, concealing something hidden in his palm.

Obi-Wan stared expectantly. Masters usually thought for weeks or months about their gifts, often traveling to far reaches for a healing crystal, or a blanket or cloak from the weavers of the planet Pasmin, who wove garment of great warmth out of material so fine it was almost weightless.

Qui-Gon pressed a smooth, round stone into Obi-Wan's hand.

"I found it years ago," Qui-Gon explained. "When I was no older than you are now."

Politely, Obi-Wan stared at the stone. Did it contain some sort of power?

"I found it in the River of Light on my home planet," Qui-Gon continued.

And? Obi-Wan wondered. But Qui-Gon was silent. Obi-Wan realized that the present his Master had given him was exactly what it appeared to be: a rock.

Qui-Gon was no ordinary Master. Obi-Wan knew that. So he looked at the tone again. His finger closed around the stone. It felt smooth and polished. He liked the way it felt in his hand. And when the sun hit it, he could see deep red streaks running through the shiny blackness. It was beautiful, he realized.

He met Qui-Gon's eyes. "Thank you, Master. I will treasure it."

"And did you complete the Padawan birthday ritual?" Qui-Gon asked. "Only by remembering the past are we able to learn from the present."

On his or her thirteenth birthday, each Padawan must take a quiet time for reflection. Both good and bad memories must be consulted and meditated on.

"I have not had time, Master," Obi-Wan admitted. His mission on Bandomeer had been full of dangers – he had been kidnapped and marooned on a mining platform, among other things. Qui-Gon knew he had not had time. Why was he asking?

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“Yes, time is elusive,” Qui-Gon said, unmoved. “But it is best to track it down. Come, the pilot is waiting.”

Obi-Wan trailed after Qui-Gon, fighting off a feeling of hopelessness. Would he ever please his new Master? Just when he felt Qui-Gon had given him the strong base of his trust, he found himself hanging free. Now he realized that the only thing Qui-Gon had ever truly given him was a rock.

Chapter Two

“Two minutes,” the pilot called out to them as they approached. “I finish loading.”

“I am Qui-Gon Jinn and this is Obi-Wan Kenobi,” Qui-Gon introduced them.

“Yes, big surprise, Jedi are not hard to spot,” the pilot mumbled, picking up a loading carton.

“And you are . . .” Qui-Gon waited.

“Pilot. I am what I do.” He had the red-streaked yellow eyes of a Phindian, as well as hands that dangled near his ankles.

“You’re a Phindian,” Obi-Wan said. “I have a friend . . . someone I know is a Phindian. His name is Guerra.” Guerra had been a fellow mining slave on the platform where Obi-Wan had been held captive. He had almost lost his life in order to save Obi-Wan.

“So I know him?” Pilot answered gruffly. “I am expected to know every Phindian in the galaxy!”

“No, of course not,” Obi-Wan said, confused. The pilot’s rudeness surprised him. It was almost as though Obi-Wan had offended him in some way.

“Then let me load, and you board,” Pilot answered brusquely.

“Come, Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon directed.

Obi-Wan trailed after Qui-Gon into the cockpit, where they took their seats.

“For our first mission together, Yoda has chosen something he thinks will be routine,” Qui-Gon told him. “Of course, Yoda also says, ‘If routine you count on, disappointed your hopes will be.’”

Obi-Wan grinned. “It is better to expect nothing, and let each moment surprise you,” he said. It was something he had been taught at the Temple.

Qui-Gon nodded. “The planet of Gala has been ruled for many years by the Beju-Tallah dynasty. They were successful in uniting a world with deep tribal hatreds. There are three tribes on Gala – the city people, the hill people, and the sea people. Over the years the Tallah rulers grew corrupt. They plundered the planet of wealth, and the people are close to revolt. The old Queen knows this. Instead of giving the throne to her son, Prince Beju, she has agreed to elections. The people will choose among three candidates. The Prince is among them. He has lived in seclusion for much of his life. The Queen feared for his safety. Yet he was trained as a ruler, and is anxious to gain the throne.”

“Elections sound wise for the planet,” Obi-Wan remarked.

“Yes, it is always better to adapt to change,” Qui-Gon agreed. “Still, some continue to resist. Prince Beju, for example. We are told that he not happy that he has to submit to a vote by the people. He considers the rule of Gala to be his birthright. We will be there as guardians of the peace, to make sure the elections go smoothly.”

Is there any sign that the Prince is planning something?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Yoda says not,” Qui-Gon answered. “But he also said that we should not rely on that.” Qui-Gon sighed. “It was a typical conversation with Yoda. So we should be prepared for anything.”

Pilot climbed into the cockpit and sat down in the seat. He leaned over to set a course into the navi-computer. “I’ll drop you

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on Gala and go on,” he said. “Now sit tight and don’t talk much.”

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan exchanged an amused glance. Were they being transported by the rudest pilot in the galaxy?

The ship took off, and within moments Bandomeer was just another planet, a grayish world in deep blue space. Obi-Wan stared out the viewscreen at it. Below him, friends he had made would go on with their lives.

“I wonder what Si Treemba is doing.” He said softly.

“Putting his nose where it doesn’t belong, most likely,” Qui-Gon said. But Obi-Wan knew that the Jedi was just as fond of Si Treemba as he was. His Arconan friend had been loyal and brave.

“He and Clat’Ha will have their hands full on Bandomeer,” Qui-Gon remarked, naming another friend. “The planet has a long way to go to reclaim their natural resources.”

“I’ll miss Guerra, too,” Obi-Wan said with a sigh. “He was a loyal friend.”

“Loyal?” Qui-Gon frowned. “He betrayed you to the guards. You almost died because of Guerra.”

“But he saved me in the end,” Obi-Wan reminded him. “Sure, the guards threw me off the mining tower. But Guerra made sure there was a sling for me to fall into.”

“You were lucky, Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon said. “The Force helped you to land safely. No, I can’t agree with you about your friend. If someone claims that he is not to be trusted, it is generally a good idea to take note of it. I’m not saying that Guerra is bad, but I’d certainly be wary of such a character.”

Suddenly, the ship veered and dipped alarmingly.

“Oops, sorry, very strange space shear,” Pilot said. “Too much distracting talk behind me. Time for hyperspace.”

The ship shot into hyperspace. Bandomeer disappeared in a rush of stars. Obi-Wan felt a thrill of excitement. He was off on his first official mission.

They were halfway to Gala when a warning light began to blink and beep insistently on the control panel.

“Don’t worry,” Pilot said. “Just a small fuel leak.”

“Fuel leak?” Qui-Gon asked. The beeping suddenly shifted to a loud siren.

“Oops, worry,” Pilot said. He shut off the indicator. “I must exit hyperspace and land on the nearest planet to our location.” Swiftly, he entered information into the navi-computer. “Not a problem,” he continued, whistling through his teeth.

The ship shuddered as it reentered normal space. Immediately, the comm unit came alive.

“Identify yourself!” a loud voice demanded.

“Ah,” Pilot muttered. “This world is unfriendly.”

“What planet is it?” Qui-Gon asked.

“Closed to outside ships,” Pilot muttered.

“Identify or be destroyed!” the voice thundered.

“So find another planet!” Qui-Gon suggested sharply, beginning to lose his patience.

“Emergency.” Pilot leaned into the comm unit. “We have an emergency on board. And Jedi! It is a Jedi emergency! Asking permission to land—“

“Permission not granted! Repeat: permission not granted!”

Qui-Gon peered through the viewscreen. “Where are we, Pilot? We must be close to Gala. This should be a populated system. There has to be somewhere else to land!”

“Not so!” Pilot cried as he maneuvered the ship with a lurch to the right.

Not so? Obi-Wan heard the expression with a start. His friend Guerra had used it so many times!

“Why not?” Qui-Gon demanded.

Suddenly two starfighters appeared and split off with each other in order to flank them. Laser cannons began to fire.

“Because we are under attack!” Pilot screamed.

Chapter Three

Pilot began to take evasive action as the starfighters screamed toward them. Obi-Wan was thrown against the console.

"I think I can lose them!" Pilot shouted as the ship was attacked by laser fire.

"Stop!" Qui-Gon roared. He threw himself forward and wrenched the control from Pilot's grasp. "Are you a fool? This transport can't outmaneuver two starfighters!"

"I'm a good pilot!" Pilot said wildly. "And can't you use that Force of yours?"

Qui-Gon gave him a sharp look, then shook his head. "We can't work a miracle," he said firmly. "The starfighters are escorting us down. If you don't follow them, they'll blast us right out of space."

Grudgingly, Pilot took the controls again. The starfighters wheeled and flanked them, guiding them down toward the planet's surface. When the landing platform was in view, they waited until they were sure the transport ship was landing, then zoomed off.

Slowly, Pilot set the transport down. Qui-Gon strode to the viewscreens to get a full view of the landing platform. "Assassin droids are surrounding the ship," he reported.

"That doesn't sound good," Pilot said nervously. "I have a couple of blasters and a proton grenade —"

"No," Qui-Gon interrupted. "We will not fight. They're here to guard us until someone arrives. They won't attack us."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Pilot remarked, eyeing them.

"I'm ready, Master," Obi-Wan said.

"Then come." Qui-Gon activated the release lever for the exit ramp. He strode out, followed closely by Obi-Wan. Pilot lurked in the doorway.

The assassin droids turned toward them but their built-in blasters did not fire. "You see, they're here as escorts," Qui-Gon said quietly. "Don't make any sudden movements."

Obi-Wan walked down the ramp, keeping his eyes on the droids. They were killing machines, designed and programmed for battle without conscience or consequence. What kind of world had they landed on?

When they hit the bottom of the ramp, Qui-Gon slowly raised his hands. "We are Jedi —" he began, but his words were cut off by blaster fire. The assassin droids were attacking!

Obi-Wan heard the flap of his Master's cape as Qui-Gon jumped and twisted, landing on a pile of old metal crates nearby. And Obi-Wan was moving too, moving before thought, leaping over the heads of the first line of droids. His lightsaber was already in his hand. He activated it and saw the reassuring blue glow.

He could hear the *click* and *whirr* of the droids' joints as the swiveled, trying to get better aim. The Jedi had the advantage of speed and better maneuverability. Obi-Wan found that, using the Force and his own perceptions, he could predict which way a droid would move.

Qui-Gon leaped down from the crate. With one stroke she sliced through three droids. Their metallic heads clattered to the floor and rolled. Their bodies twitched, puzzled, then collapsed.

Obi-Wan cut through the first droid on his right, then used his momentum to twist and roll into the legs of a second. The

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droid wobbled, trying to aim as Obi-Wan sliced through its spindly legs with his lightsaber. As soon as the droid fell, Obi-Wan dealt a blow to the control panel on its chest. The droid collapsed, inoperative.

But Obi-Wan was already moving on to the next and the next, and the next. He could sense Qui-Gon's movements behind him, and knew that Qui-Gon was driving the droids back toward the crumbling wall of the landing platform. Fighting, slicing, always moving, Obi-Wan was able to reach the outer flank of the droids, allowing him to drive them back to where Qui-Gon wanted them.

There were only four droids left standing when the Jedi were able to maneuver them against the wall. Working in tandem, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan avoided the constant blaster fire and, with a sudden movement, rushed the droids, slicing through their jointed legs. The four collapsed in a heap, and Qui-Gon attacked again, making sure they were down for good.

He turned to look at Obi-Wan. His blue eyes gleamed.

"So they weren't escorts," he said. "I was wrong. It happens."

"I'll remember that," he said with a grin.

Qui-Gon twisted, searching the hanger with a frown. "Where's that blasted Pilot?"

The Phindian was gone.

Qui-Gon strode back up the ramp into the ship. The control console had been disabled, hit by blaster fire.

"They must have ordered a droid to do that while the rest were fighting," Qui-Gon said with a frown. "Now we can't take off again."

Qui-Gon reached for his comlink. He pressed the coordinates to reach Yoda, but nothing happened. "Communications must be jammed on this world," he murmured. "Obviously, they don't want interference."

"What should we do, Master?" Obi-Wan asked.

"We need to talk to Pilot," Qui-Gon answered.

"But how will we find him?"

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Qui-Gon's mouth tightened. "Don't worry. He'll find us."

Chapter Four

They left the landing platform and followed a narrow, twisting street into the heart of the city. Qui-Gon directed Obi-Wan to raise his hood to cover his face.

“We must be on Phindar,” Qui-Gon murmured. “All those we’ve passed have been Phindians, and I know we’re close to Gala. This is Probably Laressa, their capital city. I do not think there are many alien people on this world. We must try not to attract attention. Keep your arms inside your cloak.”

Obi-Wan obeyed him. “But Master, why do you say Pilot will find us? How do you know?”

“Landing here was no accident, Obi-Wan.”

It seemed like a complete accident to Obi-Wan, but he knew better than to say so. Instead he turned his attention to his surroundings. He was not distracted now. He forgot it was his birthday, forgot everything but watching how his Master moved through the streets. As they grew closer to the center of the city and the streets grew more crowded, Qui-Gon changed. Usually, the Jedi Master’s bearing alone commanded attention. He was a large, powerfully built man and he moved with grace.

But on this planet, Qui-Gon moved differently. He lost what made him unique and shuffled along with the crowd. Obi-Wan watched, and learned. He, too, matched his pace to those around

him. He glanced at what they glanced at, looked away, kept his eyes ahead, all with the rhythm of the passerby. He saw that Qui-Gon was doing the same. The look of fierce attention was gone from Qui-Gon's gaze, but Obi-Wan knew he was taking in everything.

Phindar was a strange world. The people were dressed simply, and Obi-Wan could see that their clothes had been mended many times. Readout signs in shops announced in scrolling type NOTHING TODAY or CLOSED UNTIL SHIPMENT. Phindians would glance at the signs, sigh, and plod on further, their market baskets empty. Lines formed outside shuttered shops, as if the Phindians were willing to chance that they would open soon.

Assassin droids were everywhere, their joints clicking, heads rotating. On the muddy, unpaved street, gleaming silver landspeeders zoomed by with no regard for traffic rules or pedestrians attempting to cross.

A current ran between the people, and Obi-Wan reached out with the Force to meet and understand it. What was the feeling?

"Fear," Qui-Gon remarked quietly. "It's everywhere."

A groups of three Phindians dressed in full-length metallic silver coats suddenly appeared on the walkway. They strode, shoulder to shoulder, their dark visors swallowing up the sunlight. The other Phindians quickly moved off the walkway into the muddy road. Obi-Wan's steps faltered, astonished. The people had moved so quickly and without thought, stepping into the mud with a reaction born of habit. The silver-coated Phindians didn't falter, but took charge of the walkway as if it were their right.

Qui-Gon gave Obi-Wan a hard tug on his cape, and quickly they both stepped off the paved walkway into the muddy street. The silver-coated men marched by.

As soon as they passed, the other Phindians, without a word, climbed back onto the paved walkway. Once again, they began

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the process of looking into shops, then turning away when they saw there was nothing for sale.

“Do you notice anything strange about some of them?” Qui-Gon murmured. “Look at their faces.”

Obi-Wan gazed into the faces of the passersby. He saw resignation, desperation. But slowly he realized that on some faces he saw . . . nothing. There was a strange blankness in their eyes.

“Something is not right here,” Qui-Gon remarked softly. “It is more than fear.”

Suddenly, a large gold landspeeder screamed around a corner. The Phindians in the street scurried to safety, and the others on the walkway shrank back against the buildings.

Obi-Wan felt the dark side of the Force shimmer outward from the gold speeder. With a slight touch to his shoulder, Qui-Gon led Obi-Wan to withdraw silently and quickly. They faded back into an alley and watched the speeder blast by.

A silver-coated driver was at the controls. In the back were two figures. They wore long coats of gold. The Phindian woman had lovely orange eyes shot through with gold the color of her coat. The male next to her was larger than most, with the long, powerful arms of the Phindian people. He did not wear a mirrored visor, and his small, bronze-colored eyes swept the street arrogantly.

Obi-Wan didn’t need a Temple lesson in order to pay attention. His senses were on alert. Qui-Gon was right. Something was very wrong. Every detail he had seen told him so. Evil was at work here.

The gold speeder zoomed around the corner, nearly hitting a child who was being frantically pulled along by her mother. Obi-Wan stared after the speeder, incredulous.

“Come, Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon said. “Let’s go to the market.”

They crossed the street into a large plaza. It was an open-air market like ones Obi-Wan had seen on Bandomeer and Coruscant. Only here, there were plenty of stalls, but nothing for

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sale. Some scraps of metal, fit for nothing. A few rotten vegetables.

Still, the market was crowded with people milling about. Obi-Wan had no idea what they could be buying. In a shop window across the plaza, Obi-Wan saw a worker power up a readout sign. The word flashed in red: BREAD. Suddenly, the mass of people began pushing and hurrying toward the shop. Within seconds, there was a line that snaked around the perimeter of the plaza.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon almost lost each other in the confusion. Then, suddenly, a figure stood at Qui-Gon's elbow.

"So nice to see the Jedi again," Pilot remarked in a pleasant tone, as if he were admiring the weather. "Follow, please."

Chapter Five

Qui-Gon melted behind Pilot. Obi-Wan followed. He had no idea how Qui-Gon had known that Pilot would find them, or why Qui-Gon trusted him to lead them.

Pilot loped through twisting alleys and narrow side streets. He moved quickly, often looking from right to left, or up above to the rooftops, as if he were afraid they were being followed. Obi-Wan was sure that they doubled back on their trail a few times. Finally, Pilot stopped before a small café with a window so streaked with dirt that Obi-Wan could not glimpse the interior.

Pilot opened the door and hurried them through. It took a moment for Obi-Wan's eyes to adjust. A few small halo-lamps were mounted on the wall, but they did little to chase away the gloom. A half-dozen empty tables were scattered around the space. A faded green curtain hung in the doorway.

Pilot pushed aside the curtain and led the Jedi down a hallway past a tiny, cluttered kitchen to a smaller room at the back. The room was empty except for one customer who sat, his back to the wall, in an alcove farthest from the door.

The customer stood and spread his long Phindian arms.

"Obawan!" he cried.

It was Obi-Wan's friend Guerra!

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Guerra's orange eyes beamed at Obi-Wan. "You come at last, friend! How glad I am to see you, no lie!"

"I'm glad to see you, too, Guerra," Obi-Wan answered. "And surprised."

"It is a surprise, ha!" Guerra chortled. "But I had nothing to do with it. Not so, I lie! I think you met my brother, Paxxi Derida."

Pilot smiled at them. "It is my honor to have brought you here. Good journey, yes?"

Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow at Obi-Wan. The cheerful Derida brothers were acting as though the Jedi had accepted an invitation for a friendly visit. Instead, they'd been hijacked, fired on, then abandoned.

Qui-Gon walked farther into the room. "So Pilot deliberately dumped the fuel, didn't he?"

"Please do call me Paxxi, Jedi-Gon," Paxxi said amiably. "Of course I dumped fuel. We did not expect you to say yes to a Phindian journey."

"Did you know about this?" Obi-Wan asked Guerra.

"No, I was unaware," Guerra answered earnestly.

"Not so, you lie, brother!" Paxxi said, digging Guerra in the ribs.

"True, I lie, I do!" Guerra agreed. "I was on the ship, hidden in the cargo hold. After I escaped the mining platform, there were those who wanted to bring me back to work in the mines. But I longed for Phindar. So here I am!"

"But why did you hide?" Obi-Wan asked. "And since you are native Phindians, why didn't you just land?"

"Good question, very smart, Obawan," Guerra said earnestly. "First of all, there is a blockade. And second, criminals are especially not welcome, even if they're natives."

"You're a criminal?" Obi-Wan couldn't believe it.

"Oh, yes, but such a little one," Guerra said.

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“Not so, brother! You have a price on your head!” Paxxi chortled. “As do I! Assassin droids are ordered to shoot on sight!”

“So, it is true, brother!” Guerra agreed. “You are right again, for the first time!”

“Who put a price on your head?” Qui-Gon asked. Obi-Wan could see that he was both irritated and amused by the Deridas. “And why?”

“The Syndicat,” Guerra answered. His amiable face grew grave. “Vast criminal organization who has gained control of Phindar. Things are very bad here, Jedi. I’m sure you saw, even in the short time you were here. They started the blockade. No one can leave, no one can land. But we thought even the Syndicat wouldn’t oppose two Jedi in trouble. They would let you land, refuel, and take off again. Then my brother and I could sneak out and stay on Phindar. Easy plan!” Guerra congratulated himself. “Very smart! Not so,” he amended with a look at Qui-Gon. “It didn’t happen that way . . .”

“No, it didn’t” Obi-Wan spoke up. “First of all, we were attacked by assassin droids. Now we’re stuck on Phindar with no way to get off.”

“Ah, I’ve thought of this!” Guerra exclaimed. “True, it seems you are stuck. But even though the main spaceport is tightly controlled by the Syndicat, there are ways to get people off-planet, if you have enough money.”

“But we’re Jedi,” Obi-Wan said impatiently. “We don’t have much money. Maybe you should pay, since it’s your fault that we were stranded.”

“True, Obawan! We should pay! Do you hear this, Paxxi?” Guerra asked, amused. He and Paxxi held on to each other’s shoulders and laughed loudly in each other’s faces.

When they stopped, Guerra wiped tears from his eyes. “Good joke, Obawan. Very funny. We have no money. But no worry, please. We have a way to *get* money. Much money. We can do this easily. Well, not so – we might need a little help from Jedi.”

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“Ah,” Qui-Gon said lightly. He fixed his penetrating blue stare on Guerra. “Now we finally get to the truth. Why don’t you tell us the real reason you brought us here . . . and why you want us to stay?”

Chapter Six

Guerra smiled at Qui-Gon. "Wait, my friend. You seem to say that we deceived you, yes? Me, deceive my friend Obawan? How could such a thing be?"

Qui-Gon waited.

"Oh, my, perhaps I did so," Guerra said. "But for such a good reason!"

"What's the reason, Guerra?" Obi-Wan asked. "And this time, tell the whole truth."

"I always tell the whole truth to Obawan," Guerra assured him. "well, not so. But now, I will for you, Jedi men of honor. But where to begin?"

"Why don't you tell us why there is a death order on your head," Qui-Gon suggested. "That seems like a good place to start."

"True, it is so! Well, I suppose the Syndicat would call me a thief," Guerra said. "And others as well."

"Not a thief, brother!" Paxxi interrupted. "A freedom fighter who steals!"

"True, thank you, brother," Guerra said, bowing to Paxxi. "That is what I am. And my brother as well. You see, the Syndicat controls everything. Food and materials, med supplies, heat, everything Phindians need to survive. Naturally, in such a

situation, one must find ways to buy and sell things the Syndicat does not control.”

“A black market,” Qui-Gon supplied.

“Yes, so, a black market, you could say,” Guerra agreed, nodding. “We steal a little here, sell a little there. But all for the good of the people!”

“And your own profit,” Qui-Gon added.

“Well, that too. Shall we suffer more than we are already?” Paxxi asked. “But the Syndicat doesn’t like this. If we are to steal, we must steal for them. This, we refuse.”

“Why should we give our talents to a gang of thieves?” Guerra asked, pounding the table. “Of course, we are thieves ourselves. But honest ones!”

“So, my brother!” Paxxi agreed. “And we are not murderers and dictators.”

“So, my brother!” Guerra nodded. “That’s why we must free our beloved planet from the grip of these monsters. The Syndicat leader is Baftu. He is a gangster without a conscience. He enjoys seeing the people suffer!” Guerra’s orange eyes were mournful. “And his assistant Terra is no better, I am sorry to say. For all her beauty, her heart is black and cold.”

“They must be the Phindians we saw in the gold landspeeder,” Obi-Wan said.

“They were in gold coats?” Paxxi asked. “Yes, they are the ones.”

Guerra and Paxxi shared a sad look. They shook their heads, their cheerfulness gone.

“What about the people we saw on the street?” Qui-Gon asked. “The ones with the blank faces.”

Paxxi and Guerra shared another mournful look. Guerra sighed.

“The renewed,” he said softly. “So sad.”

“So,” Paxxi agreed.

“It is the method of ultimate control,” Guerra explained. “You know the memory wipe?”

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan nodded. "It's used to reprogram droids. It removes all traces of their memory and training so they can be reprogrammed."

Guerra nodded. "The Syndicat has developed a device to do this to Phindians who they consider enemies or agitators. They memory wipe the person, then drop them on another world, somewhere terrible. The person has no memory of who they are or what they can do. It is a game for the Syndicat. They bet on how long the person will survive. A probe droid follows them and sends back holo-pictures of what happens. Most do not survive."

Qui-Gon's face went very still. Obi-Wan had seen that look before, a look that spoke of how deeply Qui-Gon was outraged at injustice and sheer cruelty.

"And some are not sent off-planet," Paxxi said softly. "That is saddest of all, maybe. Phindar is full of rootless people who do not remember their families, their loved ones. Or the things they could once do. They are helpless. Now Phindar is full of those who pass their fathers, their wives, their children on the street and do not recognize them."

"So you seem" Guerra said, "the Syndicat will stop at nothing. Which brings us to how you can help."

"If the wise Jedi would be so kind," Paxxi added.

"You saw the signs in the shops, the market place," Guerra went on. "The Syndicat controls all the shortages. It is a method of time control, just as renewal is mind control. The shortages are fake. If the people are waiting in line all day just to feed their families, they don't have time to revolt you see. Do you ever get enough? Not so. Supplies are doles out carefully so that you have to wait in line the next day as well."

"The Syndicat has stored everything we need," Paxxi continued. "Food, med supplies, building supplies, everything. It is all hidden in warehouses. We know this."

"And some of it is held in giant storage rooms underneath their headquarter here in Laressa," Guerra said. "So you see our

plan? If we can liberate the goods, we can show the people that the Syndicat has been depriving them of food and medical supplies. They will rise in revolt! All we need is your help. I saw the Jedi mind control on the mining platform. Obawan convinced the guards to let him into storage. You see, he can do the same here!”

“Stop,” Qui-Gon said flatly. “First of all, Jedi Knights aren’t thieves. Second, we have our own mission. We are not here to interfere in another planet’s problems. And, just for argument’s sake, how are you two planning to get all those goods out of the building without a fight? And why do you think this will break the back of such a powerful criminal organization? Surely the Syndicat has enormous sums at their disposal. Why would breaking into one storage area change anything?”

“Aha! Good, Jedi-Gon. So smart, just like Obawan!” Guerra said, nudging Qui-Gon with a friendly shoulder. “Let’s discuss. First I must tell you that the storage area must have another entrance. How else could they sneak goods in and out? So all we have to do is get inside, find the other entrance, and so easy! We take everything out!”

“Not so easy,” Qui-Gon said.

“But worth the risk, I think,” Guerra insisted. “Another point I must make – along with food, medical supplies, and weapons, Paxxi and I know there’s a vault, too. All the Syndicate treasury is there!”

“A vault,” Qui-Gon repeated. “That implies high security.”

“Yes, so!” Guerra agreed happily. “But Paxxi and I have the key!”

“How did you get a key?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Ha! He asks how!” Guerra said to Paxxi.

“Ha!” Paxxi agreed. “Long story!”

“We have a way to get in the building, too,” Guerra said. “You see? Easy. So? You will go?”

Jude Watson

“Let me get this straight,” Qui-Gon interrupted in disbelief. “You want two Jedi to help two common thieves steal a treasure from a bunch of gangsters?”

Obi-Wan was silent. He agreed with Qui-Gon. It was not a Jedi-style mission. Yoda would never approve. As much as he liked Guerra, he was glad the Qui-Gon had raised the objection.

“Yes, exactly!” Guerra said, still cheerful in the face of Qui-Gon’s irritation.

“Wait, brother, we should explain further,” Paxxi said. “We should assure the Jedi that we are far more interested in liberating our people than in stealing treasure.”

“So, of course!” Guerra agreed. “Not that a little treasure wouldn’t help –“

Guerra was interrupted by a commotion coming from the café. Quickly, Paxxi slipped out of the room to investigate. Within moments, he was back.

“So sorry,” he announced. “I’m afraid it’s time to go. Assassin droids searching for us all, I fear!”

Chapter Seven

Qui-Gon sprang to his feet. He was not anxious to meet up again with those deadly killing machines. "Is there a back door?"

"Better that that, Jedi-Gon," Guerra answered. "Follow me, please."

Guerra moved to the fireplace. He pressed something Qui-Gon could not see. The wall shifted, and an opening was revealed.

They heard a crash from the café. "Time to hurry, I think," Guerra remarked pleasantly. "You first, Paxxi. Show the way to Obawan."

Paxxi slipped into the opening, and Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon followed. Guerra came last, shutting the opening behind him. The steps were stone with a depression in the center from the pressure of hundreds of years of footsteps. Paxxi moved quickly, Obi-Wan on his heels. At the top of the stairs he pushed through a grate and disappeared.

Qui-Gon climbed out and saw that he was on the roof, as he expected. The opening for the secret staircase was concealed as part of the venting system. Guerra slid the grate back into place.

Qui-Gon moved closer to the edge of the room and dropped to his knees. He lay flat, then moved forward a few inches to peer over the side.

Jude Watson

Assassin droids patrolled the streets below with jerky movements. Silver-coated Syndicat guards directed them, waving blasters. Swarms of the droids entered one shop or business after another. They threw chairs, tables, shelving, personal items out into the street as they moved. It was like a tribe of insects, picking each area clean. Any Phindian who had the misfortune to find themselves on the street quickly scurried away before the assassin droids or the Syndicat guards could administer a blow with the butt of a blaster or a jolt from a force pike.

"It doesn't look like they're searching," Qui-Gon said in a low tone to Guerra, who had lay flat beside him. "It looks as though they mean to spread terror."

"Yes, so, Jedi-Gon!" Guerra agreed nervously. "And their plan is working."

Qui-Gon froze. "Footsteps," he said in Guerra's ear. "Coming up an outside staircase."

"Time to go," Guerra said. He pushed himself back out of sight.

The gestured to Obi-Wan and Paxxi to keep quiet. Using their long, powerful arms, the brothers swung themselves over to the next roof. Qui-Gon looked at Obi-Wan. The gap between the two roofs was wide. If Obi-Wan couldn't make the jump alone, Qui-Gon would have to carry him on his back.

He asked the question silently: Can you make it? Obi-Wan nodded instantly. Once again, Qui-Gon was impressed by his Padawan's sharp instincts. Obi-Wan always seemed to know what he needed from him.

The boy hesitated only a fraction of a moment. Qui-Gon saw him gather the Force around him. Then he ran with quick, long steps up to the roofs edge and jumped. The Force and Obi-Wan's own strength propelled him safely to the other side.

Qui-Gon leaped after him. Obi-Wan courage often impressed him, as did his instincts.

The Derida brothers were already halfway across the second roof, using their long arms to push off from the ground,

increasing their speed. Guerra glanced back to make sure the Jedi were following.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan caught up, and the four jumped to the next roof. There was a structure on top of this roof, a small power shield. They darted behind it. The four stood for a moment, listening, hoping their pursuer hadn't followed this far.

But they heard something leap onto the roof. Their pursuer was out of their line of sight, but gaining. Paxxi let out a soft groan. They moved quietly and quickly to the end of the roof. Guerra reached it first. He grabbed the edge of the roof and coiled his fingers around it, ready to leap.

Suddenly a hand reached out and grabbed him by the neck. Guerra made a strangling noise. Qui-Gon whirled, ready the strike at the Phindian female who held Guerra.

"Guerra, it's me! Kaadi!" the female said.

"K-K-aaa –" Guerra answered.

"Oh. So sorry." She dropped her hand from around Guerra's neck. "Just trying to stop you. You run so fast!"

"Not fast enough, I see!" Paxxi said joyfully. "Lucky for us! We missed you, Kaadi."

Guerra, Paxxi, and Kaadi entwined their long arms around each other in a Phindian hug, squeezing three times to show their great affection. They pushed their faces close to each other and beamed smiles for a long moment.

Rubbing his neck, Guerra turned to the Jedi. "Good friends to us Jedi-Gon and Obawan, meet Kaadi, good friend also."

"Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon corrected.

"That is what I say," Guerra agreed. "Kaadi's father owns the café where we almost got captured. It has long been a meeting place for rebels. She fights the Syndicat, too."

Kaadi grinned. She was a small female, with jet-black hair and yellow eyes shot through with green. "I move goods. Do you need a spare part for a speeder? An energy battery?"

"No, thank you," Qui-Gon said politely. He seemed to be constantly surrounded by thieves on this planet.

Jude Watson

“And any word of your good father Nuuta?” Paxxi asked sympathetically, ducking his head as that he could look at her directly.

Kaadi’s smile faded, and she shook her head. “We will hear if he is no more, we think. News will reach us.”

Guerra and Paxxi were silent for a moment. Both of them reached out and wrapped one long arm around Kaadi’s slender frame

“Her father is one of the renewed,” Guerra explained to Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan. “He was sent to Alba.”

Qui-Gon nodded sympathetically. Alba was a world in the midst of a bloody, chaotic civil war.

She gazed at him with her clear yellow-green eyes. “Yes, it is bad there. But to be Phindian is to hope.”

“Yes,” Qui-Gon said quietly. “You must always hope.”

“But let me talk of why I chased you,” Kaadi said. “I must tell the Derida brothers that you have been spotted. The Syndicat knows you have returned. Efforts have been redoubled to capture you.”

“We are not afraid,” Guerra said. “Not so, I lie!”

“Do you mean all that activity down there had to do with Guerra and Paxxi?” Qui-Gon asked.

Kaadi shook her head. “Not only. They are looking for the Jedi, too. But also, anyone they know to be a rebel. Terra and Baftu are beginning mass arrests. An important visitor is arriving, and they want to be sure there is no trouble. They are proclaiming that any acts of sabotage or disruption will be met with death or renewal! Even if you are *suspected* of such things.”

“Who is arriving?” Qui-Gon asked curiously.

“Prince Beju from the planet Gala,” Kaadi answered.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan glanced at each other.

“Out spies tell us that an alliance is planned,” Kaadi said thoughtfully. “The Syndicat will fund the Prince’s mission to retake the governing of his planet. The Prince has already created a false shortage of bacta on his planet.”

“That’s an awful thing to do,” Obi-Wan said.

Qui-Gon had to agree – bacta was a medical miracle, healing even the most serious of wounds. “The injured on Gala will suffer needlessly,” he observed.

“Yes, the Prince had no conscience, just like Baftu and Terra,” Kaadi said. She pressed Guerra’s hand for a moment. “I am sorry to say this. Now the Prince will return to Gala with the bacta from Phindar. He will be a hero to his people. The Syndicat will move in. They will control Gala as they control Phindar. It is planned so.”

“And then they will take over the star system, one planet at a time, yes?” Guerra said softly. “Using fake shortages of what the people need. Wiping their memories. Assassin droids will kill opposition and others will be renewed.” He blinked at Qui-Gon. “We have seen how quickly this method can work.”

It was a cold-blooded plan. Qui-Gon knew that Guerra was most likely right when he said Gala would be only the first step.

He had tried to keep his distance from Paxxi and Guerra’s schemes. Now he saw that there was more at stake than he’d thought. If they could destroy the Syndicat’s grip on Phindar, his mission on Gala would be easier. He and Obi-Wan had to ensure that free elections would take place.

But there was more. Qui-Gon felt a deep stirring of anger. Kaadi’s bravery in the face of her distress about her father had touched him. Even Guerra and Paxxi had moved him. Behind their clownish behavior was deep suffering. He could feel it. The living Force pulsed in the brothers, strong and pure. He didn’t know if he could trust them completely, but he knew they deserved his help.

Sometimes, Qui-Gon reminded himself, fate finds you.

“We’ll help you,” Qui-Gon said to Paxxi and Guerra. Before the brothers could speak, he held up a hand to stop them. “But you must promise me something.”

“Anything, Jedi-Gon,” Guerra vowed.

Jude Watson

"You will tell me the complete truth always," Qui-Gon ordered the sternly. "You will not withhold information, or shade it, or twist it. You will obey the Jedi rule to tell the clear, solid truth."

"Yes so, Jedi-Gon!" Guerra rushed to assure him while Paxxi nodded energetically. "For a hundred moons I would not lie to you again!"

"Never mind the hundred moons," Qui-Gon said. "Just do as I say."

Obi-Wan shot his Master a questioning glance. Qui-Gon could see that the boy didn't understand his decision. His interpretation of the rules was too strict. But he would follow his Master nonetheless.

"It is better to act quickly," Guerra said. "We should break into Syndicat headquarters tonight."

Kaadi looked pale. "Break into headquarters when you have price on your head? Who thought of that?"

"I did," Guerra and Paxxi said together.

"Very brave plan, so?" Paxxi asked her.

"Maybe brave," Kaadi said. "Or maybe crazy."

"Brave or crazy, we shall see," Guerra said, unconcerned. "With Jedi along, what can go wrong?"

Qui-Gon gave the Derida brother's a look of rueful exasperation. "We'll find out tonight, I'm sure," he said.

Chapter Eight

The Syndicat headquarters were housed in a once grand but now crumbling mansion with extensive security. There were heavy gates to get inside the compound, and a laser security beam over each door and window.

“All you have to do is get us by the two guards,” Guerra whispered to Qui-Gon. “We’ll do the rest.”

Qui-Gon hated having to rely on Guerra’s honesty, but he had come too far now to turn back. He nodded.

Paxxi and Guerra led the Jedi around the compound to a back entrance. There, a guard in the usual long silver coat and dark visor stood, hand on a blaster slung in a holster crossed over his chest.

There was nothing to do but walk straight up to him. “Good evening,” Qui-Gon said. “We have an appointment.”

The guard’s head tilted to take in the two Jedi and the two Phindians. They couldn’t see his eyes. “Move along, worm.”

Qui-Gon brought the Force to bear. He surrounded the Syndicat guard’s mind with his own will. “Of course, we may enter,” he said.

The guard lowered his blaster. “Of course, you may enter,” he repeated.

Jude Watson

“You see, my brother Paxxi!” Guerra exulted. “The Jedi are powerful. I do not lie!”

“I see, brother Guerra,” Paxxi said. “It is so!”

They walked quickly through a small yard packed with landspeeders, speeder bikes, and a few gravsleds. Another guard stood before a wide stone staircase leading to the back door of the mansion.

He stepped forward, raising his blaster. “Who are you and what is your mission here?” he challenged.

Again, Qui-Gon summoned the Force. With guards like these, it was easy to overpower their small minds. They were used to taking orders and rarely thought independently.

“We are welcome to look around,” Qui-Gon said.

“You’re welcome to look around,” the guard said blankly, lowering his blaster.

They walked past him and up the stairs. Beams of laser security crisscrossed the doorway.

“Your turn,” Qui-Gon said to Guerra.

“Ah, I do nothing,” Guerra said. “You’ll see.”

A second later, the beams shut off. The door opened. An older Phindian woman with dark hair threaded with silver stood facing them. She wore the long silver coat of the Syndicat guards. Qui-Gon tensed, but she waved them inside.

“Quickly,” she said.

They stepped into a grand room with gilded walls of brilliant green stone. Soft rich carpeting was under their feet, covering the floor. The windows were hung with shimmering tapestries.

“All looted from our citizens,” Guerra murmured.

The woman led them down a hallway. It must have been built for droids or servants, for it was narrow and the floor was a dull gray stone. A long bin with various pegs and shelves held a number of weapons – blasters, force pikes, and vibro-shiv.

“For the guards to take as they go out into the streets,” Paxxi explained. “They are always well armed.”

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“Yes so, just more weapons to shoot us with!” Guerra said cheerfully.

The older woman led them to a narrow door. “Here. No security downstairs now, but you must hurry. Now I must go,” she said. Before any of them could thank her, she left, hurrying down the hall.

“She enjoys her work,” Guerra said, watching her disappear. “She can’t wait to return. No so, I lie,” he said softly. “The silver coat she wears has a tracking device in the fabric. She is monitored all the time. If Duenna spends too much time in the wrong place, assassin droids will track her down and ask her politely to return to her post. Not so, I lie! They kill her on the spot.”

Paxxi opened the door. A stone staircase led downward. Paxxi started along the way, and they followed.

The staircase took them to a large empty room.

“First storage space,” Paxxi said. “Empty, my brother. Strange, or not so?”

“It is so,” Guerra said. He walked through a doorway into another space. It was also empty. Hurrying now, Guerra and Paxxi passed from empty room to empty room in the vast storage level.

“All gone,” Paxxi said.

“Yes so,” Guerra agreed sadly.

“You risked all our lives for this?” Obi-Wan asked incredulous.

Qui-Gon was just as irritated as Obi-Wan, but he tried to keep calm. “Didn’t you check your information? Or did your spy betray you?”

“Not so, Jedi-Gon!” Guerra cried, flustered. “Duenna is on our side!”

“How can you be so sure?” Qui-Gon asked. “Never mind. We have to get out of here.”

Jude Watson

Suddenly they heard a slight whirring noise. Qui-Gon cocked his head. He knew that noise. But something about it was strange. He did not expect to hear it indoors.

“Speeders,” Obi-Wan said.

A small floater suddenly zoomed around a corner, driven by a Syndicat guard. Behind him appeared three more floaters. Guards drove the speeders, and each had an assassin droid behind him. The first guard maneuvered his speeder to get a clear shot at Paxxi.

“Move!” Qui-Gon shouted. He reached out with the Force and propelled Paxxi backward. The blaster fire missed him by inches as he slammed against the wall.

Obi-Wan’s lightsaber was in his hand in a movement so fast it was just a blur of pulsating light. He slashed at the guard, but was only able to knock the hand behind him on the speeder. Qui-Gon leaped forward but the speeder zoomed ahead, almost knocking him down. Qui-Gon was only able to deliver a glancing blow to the guard.

Suddenly, a slender beam of light shot out from the wall, straight at Guerra. Guerra saw it and began to move. Qui-Gon saw the light, too, and summoned the Force to help. Guerra leaped over the beam just in time.

“Disruptor beams!” Qui-Gon shouted to Obi-Wan. The weapons had been outlawed on most worlds. It sent a visible blast of energy capable of cutting someone in two.

Obi-Wan charged at a floater heading for him and struck the driver across the neck with his lightsaber. The driver cried out and lost control of the floater, which crashed into the wall, knocking him unconscious. A disruptor beam suddenly shot out from the wall and hit the assassin droid, whose right-hand controls suddenly smoked and sputtered. The droid fell, but began to push off with his left-side controls. Meanwhile, the beam came straight at Obi-Wan, who leaped over it, twisting in midair to land safely next to Qui-Gon.

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“The beams are triggered by movement,” Qui-Gon said tersely. “Others are on constantly. Avoid them at all costs. Use the Force, Padawan.” Qui-Gon turned and sliced at the assassin droid from the downed floater, cutting off its head. Then he leaped forward and lunged at the nest floater. He dealt a glancing blow to the guard as it zoomed past and leaped over a disruptor beam.

The beams left on were easy to avoid, if the Jedi didn’t allow themselves to be maneuvered into them. It was harder to predict where the beams triggered by movement would strike. Qui-Gon reached out for the Force, drawing it around him, feeling it, gaining strength from it. He sent his senses out to meet Obi-Wan’s so that the Force would multiply and fill the room.

A floater headed for Paxxi, who bounded away, using his arms to propel himself. Qui-Gon knew the brothers had no weapons. He leaped after the floater, avoiding a disruptor beam with a twist of his body. Obi-Wan was already moving to the left, and the flanked the floater in a pincer movement, driving toward it with their lightsabers slashing. The guard fell backward from the blows, knocking himself and the assassin droid off the floater. Blaster fire came at Qui-Gon from his right, but he was already twisting to the left. He half turned to deliver a final blow to the guard.

The guards on the two remaining floaters were more agile. They drove Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan before them into the next room. Since the ceilings were high, the Syndicat drivers could easily avoid the disruptor beams by flying higher, then zooming down to assault Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon.

The drivers of the floaters drove them relentlessly. It became a game to them. They laughed as they aimed at the Jedi, sending them leaping out of the way.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan developed a strategy born of desperation: run, turn, fight, reverse, and run again. Disruptor beams sizzled around them. One hit Qui-Gon’s lightsaber and the shock sent a jolt of pain up his arm.

Jude Watson

The faceless guards were determined, the assassin droids keeping up a steady stream of blaster fire. So far, the armor protected the Syndicate guards well. Qui-Gon began to deflect blaster fire at any part of them exposed, neck, wrist, their booted feet. Obi-Wan did the same.

Qui-Gon could see that Obi-Wan was tiring. His own legs ached from the constant running and leaping to avoid the beams and blaster fire. They could not hold out for much longer. The guards drove them from room to room. Qui-Gon began to see that the rooms formed a kind of maze. He tried to keep his focus. He doubted that he remembered how to reach the exit. They had lost Paxxi and Guerra completely. He only hoped that the brothers had found a place to hide.

At last they reached a room where the disruptor beams were thicker than before. They crisscrossed the room in a thick web. It would be impossible for the Jedi to evade them.

The whirr of the two floaters was behind them now. Any moment they would burst into the room. Qui-Gon quickly took several steps back from the threshold of the room until he was almost in the corner. He directed Obi-Wan to take the opposite corner. Obi-Wan nodded bravely at Qui-Gon, letting him know that he had guessed the desperate plan Qui-Gon had devised.

They would have to gauge the exact speed and height of the floaters a second before they appeared. Then they would run, using their momentum and the power of the Force to leap into the air. They would attack the first speeder, colliding with it midair, hoping to dislodge both the pilot and the droid. And then they would have to land safely themselves.

There was no time to review. Qui-Gon only hoped Obi-Wan could follow him.

The whirr of the floater grew closer. Qui-Gon began the charge. Obi-Wan took off at the same moment. The built up speed in the huge room as they ran, and both lifted off the ground at the exact moment the floater burst into the room.

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Qui-Gon had time to see the surprised gape of the Syndicat guard before he hit him full in the chest. The guard flew off the bike, with Qui-Gon managing to get a lightsaber blow to his neck as he fell. The assassin droid had time to fire a quick burst before Obi-Wan hit him, feet-first, and sent him flying.

The power of their leap kept them in midair. Obi-Wan somersaulted before landing.

Then the second floater burst into the room and immediately collided with the first. The crash sent the second guard and droid flying. The two floaters kept moving through the air and hit a disruptor beam, which sent them careening out of control. The room shook as they crashed into the wall.

Suddenly, a portion of the huge wall dislodged with a groan, revealing an opening. The disruptor beams sizzled and went silent.

The Syndicat guards were just as surprised as the Jedi. Only the assassin droids kept moving, damaged but not destroyed. One had lost an arm, one a piece of its control panel. Their blasters were still operational. The shots missed the Jedi by a distance so small it sounded like a whisper by their ears.

The Force told Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon to jump, and they did, vaulting over the guards to attack the assassin droids first. Qui-Gon cut through one, rendering it worthless. Obi-Wan went straight for the other's control panel and with a stab of his lightsaber turned it into a sizzling junk heap.

The Syndicat guards had recovered from the surprise of being knocked off their floaters and uncovering a hidden room. They pulled out force pikes and advanced on the Jedi.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan stood their ground, lightsabers held down, pointing at the floor. Qui-Gon counted off the seconds in his head. He hoped his Padawan would have the same battle rhythm. They would need to keep their head clear their blows methodical. They could not let their exhaustion drive them. He reached out to the Force. It surged around him now; he had only to tap into it.

Jude Watson

The Syndicat guards were still a few steps away when Obi-Wan leaped forward. *Too early!* Qui-Gon cried in his head. But he sprang to the right to cover Obi-Wan's flank. Obi-Wan attacked in a fury, his lightsaber a blue blur in the dimness. Qui-Gon had to match his speed or be unable to protect him. He tried to slow down the boy's rhythm, but Obi-Wan had let his exhaustion push his control to the breaking point. Qui-Gon realized that he could not always count on Obi-Wan to pick up on his pacing. Something to work on later, when they had time. If they had time.

Together the Jedi slashed and jabbed, always moving, ducking, rolling, lunging until they had defeated their opponents. The two Syndicat guards fell heavily.

Qui-Gon stepped over them, sheathing his lightsaber in the same movement. He went to the opening and peered inside.

"I think we found the vault," he told Obi-Wan.

Chapter Nine

A voice came from behind them. “Good work, Jedis!” Guerra approved in a hushed, reverent tone.

“We knew that even though you were greatly outnumbered, you would win,” Paxxi assured them.

Qui-Gon lifted an eyebrow. “Not so?”

“So!” the brothers chorused.

Obi-Wan tried to control his shallow breathing. The last stand against the guards had drained him of his energy. He knew that he had been at the edge of his control. Qui-Gon had remained cool and methodical, covering any sloppy moves of Obi-Wan’s with his own swift strokes. Although they had defeated the guards, Obi-Wan was disappointed in himself. He knew he had given in to his impatience and had lost his focus. It had been a difficult fight.

“Thanks for your help,” Obi-Wan said irritably, deactivating his lightsaber.

“Oh, we help by hiding, Obawan,” Guerra assured him. “The Derida brothers are no good on a battle. We’d be in the way.”

“Yes, you are so much better at fighting!” Paxxi said, beaming.

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. He wished he could feel as enthusiastic as the Deridas about his abilities.

He turned to find Qui-Gon studying him. "You fought well, Padawan," his Master said quietly. "Next time, you will do better. It is time to focus on the now. We achieved our aim here."

"Yes, you found the vault! Excellent!" Guerra exclaimed. He frowned when he took in the fallen Syndicat guards and assassin droids. "This isn't good. We have to leave without the Syndicat knowing we were here. It is better so."

"I'll find a place to hide them," Paxxi said

"Paxxi is good at that," Guerra said.

"We won't ask why," Qui-Gon said with a sigh.

"No, is better so," Guerra agreed. "But first, we should take the armor coats. Might come in handy. Blaster fire seems to follow Jedi."

"You're the one who brought us here!" Obi-Wan cried. He couldn't help being irritated at Guerra. He was beginning to realize how his friend twisted facts to suit his own purposes.

"True, Obi-Wan!" Guerra said cheerfully. "You make a point!"

Paxxi found an equipment room piled with old parts for speeders and various circuits. There was inch-thick dust on the parts and the floor.

"Good," Qui-Gon approved. "The room is no longer used. The guards won't be discovered for quite some time."

Using the floaters and carefully avoiding the remaining disruptor beams, they transported the fallen guards and droids there. They took four armor coats and visors with them and closed the panel door behind them.

"I saw a pen for the floaters by the stairs, so we can leave them there," Guerra said. "Now let's see the vault."

"Let us go first," Qui-Gon directed. "Obi-Wan and I will alert you to disruptor beams."

But before they could take a step, a comlink embedded in one of the coats began to signal.

“Guard check,” a voice said. “Guard check. Why were disruptor beams activated?”

Guerra’s orange eyes went wide. Paxxi threw a hand to cover his mouth. Qui-Gon frowned.

He found the comlink and activated it, using the Force to respond in a way that would not draw attention. “Routine check. Repeat, routine check. All safe below. Suggest shutting off disruptor security beams on lower level for further check.”

“Done.”

With a buzzing noise, the disruptor beams retracted.

“Beams retracted,” Qui-Gon said.

“End shift,” the voice responded. “Leave premises. Lockdown in ten minutes.”

“Message received,” Qui-Gon responded. He shut off the comlink and looked at the others. “We don’t have much time.”

“Then we must hurry,” Paxxi said.

They hurried to the vault and eased into the wall opening. Obi-Wan gasped. He had thought the room upstairs was grand. This room glittered with treasures. Rich rugs were piles on the floor, one on top of the other. Sleeping platforms were draped with the finest, softest coverlets. Large pillows embroidered in golden and silver thread were stacked next to the platforms.

Qui-Gon prowled, looking at the various boxes and cartons stacked along the wall. “There’s enough food and medical supplies here to last for months.”

“Music, hologram visuals,” Paxxi said, poking into another corner.

“Emergency supplies and weapons,” Obi-Wan added, checking the cartons near him.

“It’s their sanctuary,” Qui-Gon said. “They could last here for months if they had to.”

“Here!” Guerra called.

They hurried toward him. A door with a control panel was almost completely concealed in the corner.

“This must be the treasury,” Guerra said.

Jude Watson

“Well, at least you were right about that,” Qui-Gon said.

“All right, break in,” Obi-Wan urged. “We don’t have much time.”

Guerra looked at Paxxi. Paxxi looked at Guerra.

“Of course, Obawan, no problem,” Paxxi agreed. “Oops, I lie, not so! Just one problem.”

Qui-Gon closed his eyes and took a breath, as if to gather his shredded patience. “What?”

They both looked at the floor. “Ah,” Guerra said. “So. We told the whole truth, yes. But not the *complete* whole truth. Yes, we can break in to treasury. So easy! But we need something first. You see, the Syndicat robbed *us* first. They broke into our hiding place and stole everything! Everything we had spent so much effort and time to accumulate –“

“To *steal*,” Obi-Wan corrected.

“Just so, Obawan, we stole it, yes, but only to sell it back to the people,” Guerra said earnestly. “We had speeder parts, circuits, engines – all things we used to have here on Phindar in great abundance, but no more. We would sell to the people for much cheaper prices than the Syndicat! So you see we do a great public service –“

“Just stick to the facts, Guerra,” Obi-Wan interrupted impatiently. His friend was really beginning to test their friendship. Why hadn’t Guerra told them this before?

“Of course, good advice, Obawan,” Paxxi agreed. “So they stole from us. But what they did not know is that among those things was something very valuable.”

“Something my good brother Paxxi invented,” Guerra added eagerly. “An anti-register. It can undo the action of a transfer register.”

The two brothers nodded and smiled at the Jedi. A transfer register was a method of recording transactions in the galaxy. An electro-optical device recorded the prints of the buyers and sellers.

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“Paxxi’s device can duplicate any print in a security or registration system,” Guerra told them.

Obi-Wan understood at once. Paxxi’s anti-register device could be valuable beyond measure. It would allow the user to seize property and goods and break into any print-reliant security system throughout the galaxy.

“That device is very dangerous,” Qui-Gon said quietly.

“Dangerous?” Guerra asked. “Not so, Jedi-Gon! It will help us!”

“But if the Syndicat knew you had it – if *anyone* knew, it would put you in great danger.”

Paxxi waved a hand. “We are not afraid. Not so! I lie, of course we are. But that makes us careful. We can steal the treasury, leave the planet if we have to, even sell the device on the black market –“

“Can you imagine how much it’s worth?” Guerra chortled. “Twelve fortunes!”

Qui-Gon looked stern.

“Not that this is important,” Guerra hurriedly said. “First, we break the Syndicat, yes?”

“Which brings us back to our problem, my brother,” Paxxi said. “Our stolen goods were here. Now they’re not. So,” he said to Qui-Gon, “we can’t break in.”

“Yet,” Guerra added. “But so, we will.”

“As soon as we find the device,” Paxxi added helpfully.

“We had better return,” Guerra said. “Lockdown will be soon. Duenna will be waiting.”

With an exasperated sigh, Qui-Gon followed them from the room. They located the device that moved the wall, and it slid smoothly back into place. Then they took the floaters back to the pen behind the staircase. Quickly, they headed up to the main level.

“You’re late,” Duenna whispered worriedly when they appeared. Her bright orange eyes swept the corridor behind her. Then her tense face softened when she looked at Paxxi and

Jude Watson

Guerra. “But I am glad to see you. They ordered a random routine sweep of the lower floors. I could not warn you.”

“We took care of the guards,” Paxxi assured her. “But downstairs is empty now. No goods are stored.”

“So sorry to tell you now,” Duenna said, walking quickly down the corridor with them. “I just found out after I left you. The supplies were moved to the warehouse by the spaceport. Most of them will be loaded onto Prince Beju’s transport to be taken back to Gala.” She paused near the door. Now you must go. Quickly! Terra and Baftu have returned. Lockdown is in only a few minutes.”

“Duenna!” The voice was sharp, commanding. Footsteps clicked in the corridor off to the right. “Duenna!”

Duenna’s face went pale. “It is Terra!” she whispered.

Chapter Ten

The corridor was wide and empty. There was nowhere to hide. Duenna put a finger to her lips. Then she scurried around the corner into the adjacent corridor.

Qui-Gon commanded them all with his sharp blue gaze to be still. He pondered their situation. Terra was only meters away. Obi-Wan's hand drifted to the hilt of his lightsaber, prepared for anything.

"No need to run me down, old woman." Terra's voice cracked like a whip. "Where have you been?"

"In the kitchens," Duenna said. Her voice was a murmur.

"In the kitchens. Eating again? Or avoiding me?" Look at me."

There was a pause. Guerra and Paxxi suddenly reached out and gripped each other's shoulders.

Terra's voice slowed to a purr. "What are you hiding from me, Duenna? Have you seen Paxxi and Guerra?"

Paxxi and Guerra squeezed each other hard.

"Not so. I have not," Duenna replied. Her voice was steady.

"Yet you are not surprised to hear they are on Phindar," Terra said.

"I am surprised," Duenna said. "I choose not to show it."

Jude Watson

“Insolent!” Terra’s voice now shimmered with anger. “Perhaps I should warn you, old woman. If you see Paxxi or Guerra, if you even talk to those traitors, I will personally see to it that you are renewed!”

Paxxi and Guerra looked at each other with stricken expressions.

“But not before you see the brothers die before your eyes,” Terra hissed.

“No!” Duenna cried. “I beg you –”

“Beg if you wish,” Terra said. “Obviously, there isn’t a level you won’t sink to. You do my bidding, clean my clothes, pick up my trash, why should you not beg me?”

“I would beg, if you would only hear me,” Duenna said in a shaky voice. “If only you would hear what you were, what you could be again –”

“Enough! Hear me, Duenna. Any contact with them, they die. And your memory is gone forever, old woman. But don’t worry – I will choose the most terrible planet I can to drop you on! Now come with me. I need my bath drawn.”

Terra’s forceful footsteps headed off. They heard Duenna’s softer tread behind hers.

“Come,” Guerra whispered. “We must go.”

They slipped into the silver armor coats and mirrored visors. It was easy to mingle with the rest of the Syndicat guards as they left the building.

As soon as they reached the dark street, Guerra led them down a narrow alley. There, they removed the coats and visors. Guerra put them in a satchel she carried.

“Why does Terra suspect that Duenna will contact you?” Obi-Wan asked the Derida brothers. “Does she know that Duenna is a rebel sympathizer? Isn’t it dangerous to use her?”

“No so,” Guerra said softly. “Terra knows nothing for sure. She is afraid Duenna will contact us because she knows Duenna is our mother.”

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Obi-Wan shot a surprised look at Qui-Gon. “But why is she working for the Syndicat?”

Qui-Gon wanted to hear what the Phindian brothers had to say.

Guerra and Paxxi exchanged a rueful look. Paxxi nodded at Guerra. “The Jedi should know,” he said.

“Yes, so,” Guerra said sadly. “Duenna works for Terra because Terra is her daughter.”

“So Terra is –“

“Our sister,” Paxxi said.

“She is not the sister we had,” Guerra explained. “Not the one we knew. She was renewed when she was only eleven years old. The Syndicat raised her. She had no memory of the girl she used to be. She grew up here, in this place, with cruelty and power.”

“With no love,” Paxxi said gently.

“So that is why our mother sacrificed her life,” Guerra said. “She thought even as a servant, she could give Terra love. Maybe bring back part of the girl she knew.” Guerra shrugged. “Yet it was never so. Terra did not change. Duenna still remains. She will stay and watch over her daughter – no matter what she is. No matter what she has become.”

Chapter Eleven

That night, Guerra and Paxxi shared their cramped quarters with Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan. It was a tiny room in the small house that Kaadi shared with her family. She had insisted the brothers stay with her once she'd found them, and she'd welcomed the Jedi just as warmly.

They bedded down for the night on blankets spread on the floor. Paxxi fell asleep immediately, and Qui-Gon was in the state the Jedi called restful-sleep-in-danger, his eyes closed but a corner of his mind alert at all times.

Obi-Wan could not sleep. He could not stop thinking about what it must be like to lose your memory. He could not imagine anything more terrible. He had worked so hard at the Temple, made deep friendships, learned so much from the Masters. What if all that was taken from him?

"Are you awake, Obawan?" Guerra whispered from the blanket nest to him.

"Yes," Obi-Wan answered softly.

"Yes so, I thought so," Guerra said. "I heard you thinking. You are still angry with me?"

"I'm not angry with you Guerra," Obi-Wan said. "Maybe I was impatient with you. You never tell the whole truth."

“Not so,” Guerra whispered. “Oh, I lie. You are right, Obawan, as you are always. I sense that you do not agree with the decision of Jedi-Gon to help us.”

“Not so,” Obi-Wan said. “. . . Or so. Maybe I lie.”

“Ah, you tease me,” Guerra said mournfully. “And this I deserve from you, I know.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about your sister?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Terra.” Guerra murmured. He let out a gusty sigh. “She is my enemy, is she not, and yours? Yet it was not always so. You must believe this. If you could have known her as a child! Sunny and bright and eager! And funny! She was our tagalong, we called her, my good brother Paxxi and I. Baftu took all that was good and erased it, then filled in the spaces with hate. You see why we must crush them, Obawan? That is why Duenna risks so much – she and Paxxi think if the Syndicat is no more, they can reach Terra again.”

“Do you think so?” Obi-Wan asked.

Guerra sighed again. “No, friend,” he said. “I do not. But I hope so. Just as my family does. In some cases, some strong-minded beings can resist the effects of the memory wipe. They can hold on to flashes of memory. Just scraps of things – a face, a smell. A feeling. I fear it is not so for Terra. It has been so long for her. I have not the belief that my good brother does. I have only this tiny hope in my heart.”

“It’s something to hold on to,” Obi-Wan said.

“Yes so,” Guerra said quietly. “So if I tricked my friend, if I maybe did not tell him everything in the beginning, maybe my good friend Obawan will understand and grant me help again.”

A pause stretched out between them. Obi-Wan’s irritation at Guerra left in a rush. He saw the terror and pain that Guerra had lived with. Just as on the mining platform, when Guerra had covered his fear of certain death with smiles and jokes, here on Phindar he would do the same. Qui-Gon had been right to help them. Obi-Wan knew that now.

Jude Watson

“Of course, I will help you,” he whispered, but Guerra was already asleep.

The following night, Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon, Guerra and Paxxi slipped the armor coats over their clothes and donned visors. Under the shelter of the overhang, they watched the activity at the warehouse by the spaceport.

There didn’t seem to be high security. Syndicat members entered and exited the buildings without showing passes. They would only have to pretend to be delivering a shipment for cover. Or at least the hoped so.

Paxxi and Guerra had worked all day to father authentic-looking supplies. Although their containers were marked “Bacta” and “Medpacs,” they were actually filled with old circuit parts. But at least they would have something to carry inside.

“As soon as we’re inside, we should split into two groups,” Qui-Gon instructed. “Guerra, go with Obi-Wan, Paxxi with me. We’ll start at opposite ends and meet in the middle, if we can. If you can locate your goods and find the anti-register device, leave. If we can’t find it, we all exit the building in twenty minutes. We can’t take any chances.”

“But what if we don’t find it?” Paxxi asked.

“We try again,” Qui-Gon said. “We can’t risk being discovered. The sooner we get out of there, the better.” He turned to Obi-Wan. “Don’t forget to keep your hands in your pockets so that no one can tell how long your arms are. We must look like Phindians.”

Obi-Wan nodded. The four walked quickly across the courtyard. At the door of the warehouse, Qui-Gon barked out, “Delivering bacta,” to the guard at the door. The guard waved them through.

Inside was a vast, high-ceilinged space. Row after row of transparent shelving units went from one end of the building to the other. Each shelf was piled with bins and cartons. Syndicat

members in silver armor coats loaded supplies onto floaters, then headed for the large loading dock in the rear.

Paxxi and Guerra stopped, their faces registering shock. Obi-Wan knew why. Here was row after row of everything the Phindian people desperately stood in line for. Med supplies. Food. Parts to make their speeders run, their droids and machines operational. All hoarded by the Syndicat. The brothers had known this, but seeing it all with their own eyes must have been like receiving a blow.

“Keep moving,” Qui-Gon said in a pleasant tone that hummed with urgency underneath.

Hands in his pockets, Obi-Wan headed off with Guerra to the far end of the warehouse. They quickly strode down row after row. Other Syndicat members sometimes passed them. They would nod and keep going.

“This is easy, Obawan!” Guerra whispered. “So glad we stole these coats!”

Suddenly, the comlink in Guerra’s coat began to signal him.

“Guard K23M9, report in,” a voice said. “Explain whereabouts.”

“It’s probably a routine check,” Obi-Wan murmured.

Guerra activated the comlink. “Warehouse delivery,” he said.

After a pause, the comlink crackled. “Unscheduled. Explain.”

Guerra looked at Obi-Wan in a panic. “Tell him he’s mistaken,” Obi-Wan whispered.

“Not so!” Guerra said rapidly into the comlink. “Orders received.” He shut off the comlink.

“We’d better do this fast,” Obi-Wan muttered.

They turned down the next row. As Guerra scanned the shelves, Obi-Wan kept watch.

“Found it, Obawan!” Guerra cried softly. “There, to shelf! I recognize my carton of energy cells. It must be here.” He climbed up on the bottom shelf, then reached up with his long arms. He grabbed a carton and hauled it down. Peering inside, he smiled broadly. “In here, at the bottom.”

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan shoved the carton marked “Bacta” in its place. “All right, let’s go.”

They strode down the aisle, trying to look as though they weren’t hurrying. An announcement suddenly boomed out of a speaker near them.

“Guard K23M9, report to security. Guard K23M9, report to security.”

“That’s me! What should we do, Obawan?” Guerra asked panicked.

Obi-Wan thought carefully. They had to get the anti-register device out of the building. “Give me your coat,” he ordered Guerra.

Guerra hesitated. “But that will put you in danger, Obawan. This I did once on Bandomeer. But this I will not do again.”

“The Force will protect me,” Obi-Wan told him, even though he doubted it. “You must find Qui-Gon and get that device out of here.”

“You can use the Force to escape?” Guerra asked.

“Yes. Hurry.” Obi-Wan slipped out of his own coat. Reluctantly, Guerra did the same. They exchanged the armor coats. Guerra put on Obi-Wan’s and tucked the carton containing the anti-register device under his arm.

“Now go,” Obi-Wan told him as Syndicat guards suddenly appeared around the corner on floaters

Guerra swiveled and walked away, past the guards who headed for Obi-Wan. They did not give him a glance. Obi-Wan turned and saw four more guards heading for him in the opposite direction. He knew he could not resist. Even if he were to get past the guard here, security would lock down the building, and Guerra would never make it out. There was only one thing he could do. He had to surrender.

Guerra disappeared around a corner. The guards sped up to him and hovered, their blaster pointed at his neck, the only unprotected part of him.

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“Guard K23M9, you are out of your quadrant,” one of them said. “You know the penalty. We will escort you to headquarters. Resist, and you’re dead.”

Obi-Wan nodded. He climbed aboard the largest floater. The guard behind him kept the blaster against his neck. They took off for Syndicat headquarters.

Chapter Twelve

Obi-Wan watched and waited for the chance to escape, but it was impossible. Part of his Temple training had been in patience, but it had been his worst subject.

The headquarters was swarming with guards. First, he was stripped of his armor coat and visor.

“He’s not a Phindian,” one of the guards said, surprised. Obi-Wan said nothing.

The other guard grabbed his lightsaber. He tried to activate it, but could not. “What is this? Some primitive weapon?”

Again, Obi-Wan said nothing.

The two guards looked at each other nervously. “We’d better take him to Weutta.”

Weutta turned out to be the head of security. The irises of Obi-Wan’s eyes were scanned to compare to the real Guard K23M9. Obi-Wan saw the words NO MATCH on the screen. Nothing else came up.

“So, we have no record of you, rebel” the security head said, pushing his face up to Obi-Wan’s. Who are your contacts? Why did you come to Phindar? What happened the guard K23M9?”

Again, Obi-Wan said nothing. Weutta gave him a light jab with a force pike. Even that touch was enough to send him to his

knees. His head spun, and his side was on fire from the electrifying jolt.

"I'll take this one to Baftu," Weutta said. "We're on high security. He wants to see all the rebels."

Weutta roughly pushed a weakened Obi-Wan down what felt like miles of hallway. At last they reached a heavily carved, massive door. A guard nodded them through. They were in a large, completely empty room with heavy tapestries hung over the windows. Another pair of massive double doors were at the opposite end.

Weutta walked toward them and stopped. He pushed Obi-Wan down on his knees, then pressed his face down. "Wait here, slug," he growled. "And don't look up."

Keeping his face down, Obi-Wan moved only his eyes to watch Weutta as the pudgy Phindian straightened his visor and smoothed his armor coat. He cleared his throat. Obviously, even the head of security was nervous about seeing Baftu. Then he pressed a button on the side of the door.

A second later, the door swung open. An annoyed Baftu stood in the doorway of his office.

"Why have you disturbed me?" he barked, scowling.

"I have brought you a rebel —" Weutta babbled quickly.

"Why do you pester me with such things?" Baftu roared.

"B-because you ordered me to," Weutta answered, his voice almost a whine.

"You disgust me. Leave the rebel and get out."

"But —"

"Excuse me, Head Slug," Baftu said in a purring, murderous tone. "Are you still here in my line of sight? Or do I need to impale you on an electro-jabber until you shake yourself to death?"

"No," Weutta whispered, and ran past a kneeling Obi-Wan to the far doors. He slipped through them and disappeared.

"Baftu!" It was Terra. Obi-Wan couldn't see her. "I'm not finished!"

Jude Watson

Baftu turned away, not even glancing in Obi-Wan direction. He left the door partially ajar. Slowly, Obi-Wan crept forward, his ears straining. He called upon the Force to sharpen his senses so he could hear the two. They spoke in furious murmurs.

"I was against the alliance with Prince Beju from the beginning," Terra said. "What do we know of him? We have yet to meet him or see him. Everything is done through his intermediaries. I do not trust someone I cannot see."

"He is coming tomorrow," Baftu said. "You will be able to look at him. Enough of this."

"And why are you thinking of expansion now?" Terra went on, ignoring him. "We should consolidate our power here on Phindar. Rebel action is growing. The people are starving. Med centers are crying out for supplies. You have created too many shortages, Baftu! The people are bound to revolt."

Baftu laughed "And what if they do? They are sick and hungry. If they can find any weapons, they are too weak to hold them for long."

"This is not a joke, Baftu! Terra cried furiously, her voice rising.

"Ah, you're getting soft, pretty Terra," Baftu said. "But if the state of things on Phindar worries you, then why don't you handle it? You can appease the people with some extra food this week. Not a bad idea since Beju is coming. It will distract them. Just don't give them any bacta – I've promised most of it to Beju."

"I do not trust that Prince –"

"As you have said," Baftu interrupted, "over and over again. I will handle the meeting. You handle Phindar. Now I have work to do."

"What about the rebel?" Terra asked.

"You handle it. Phindar is your responsibility, remember?"

Obi-Wan heard clicking footsteps, then the opening and shutting of a door in the other room. Quickly, he scuttled

backward on his hands and knees, then pressed his face down into his hands.

A moment later, a boot nudged his shoulder. He had not even heard Terra approach on the soft carpet.

“Head up, rebel.”

He raised his head. How strange to see the friendly eyes of Guerra and Paxxi in such a cruel face.

“So, you are not a Phindian. Who are you?” Terra asked impatiently.

“A friend,” Obi-Wan answered.

Terra snorted. “Not to me. You impersonated a guard. You know the penalty. Well, perhaps you do not. Perhaps your Phindian *friends* did not tell you. You will be renewed and transported off-planet.”

Obi-Wan did not move a muscle, but inside he cried out. Renewed! He did not imagine this. He was prepared to withstand torture. But to have his memory gone! That was too painful to imagine.

Terra sighed. She looked weary, and Obi-Wan suddenly saw a glimpse of the girl she had been. She looked away into the distance. “Don’t worry, rebel. It’s not as bad as people say.”

Perhaps seeing traces of Guerra and Paxxi in her features made Obi-Wan feel he could risk a question. “Do you miss your family?”

She stiffened for a moment. He expected a blow, waited for it. But instead, Terra turned to him. Her bleak gaze held a sadness that was full of empty spaces.

“How can you miss what you do not remember?” she asked.

Chapter Thirteen

Qui-Gon's voice was as sharp as the edge of a vibro-shiv. "You abandoned him!"

"Not so, Jedi-Gon! He insisted!" Guerra cried. "And it happened so fast. I did not know what to do!"

"You could have stayed with him!" Qui-Gon snapped.

"But Obawan told me to take the anti-register. It was most important, he said," Guerra cried desperately.

Qui-Gon let out an exasperated sigh, Obi-Wan was right. They had set out to find the device. That had to be all important.

He turned back to Guerra and tried to compose himself. They stood hidden in the shadows outside the huge warehouse. He wanted to rush at Guerra, rush at the first Syndicat guard he saw, rush into the headquarters. His anger filled him, raw and pulsing, irrational. He was surprised at the power of it. Guerra had betrayed Obi-Wan on the mining platform. Had he done it again?

"I did not know what to do, Jedi-Gon," Guerra said helplessly behind him. "Obawan insisted it so. He said, give me your coat. He said the Force would help him now I see he only wanted me to obey. If I knew he would be taken away, I would have so very gladly gone in his place."

Qui-Gon turned and looked into Guerra's sorrowful eyes. His instinct told him to trust the Phindian. And everything he said

about Obi-Wan rang true. His Padawan had sacrificed himself in order to get the anti-register device out of the building. Qui-Gon would have done the same.

Paxxi spoke up softly. "We have a signal for Duenna in case of emergency. We could activate it. She will meet us tomorrow morning in the marketplace and tell us how Obawan is and what plans there are for him. We can arrange rescue then."

"Tomorrow id too late," Qui-Gon said. "It has to be tonight. Now. I won't leave Obi-Wan there for so long."

Paxxi and Guerra exchanged glances. "So sorry to say not so, Jedi-Gon," Guerra said. "But headquarters locks down for the night. No one can get in or out. Not even Terra and Baftu."

"What about the anti-register device?" Qui-Gon asked. "You said it could get you in anywhere."

"Yes, so," Guerra said. "Anywhere. Except headquarters after lockdown."

"Duenna will watch out for Obawan," Guerra said softly. "She will protect him as best she can."

Qui-Gon turned away again. Helpless rage filled him again. But this time it was not directed at Guerra. It was directed at himself. He should have gone with Obi-Wan and let the Derida brothers fend for themselves. But he was afraid they would not be able to get the anti-register device out of the building.

"Make the decision, make another," Yoda always said. "Remake one past, you cannot."

Yes, he could only go forward. And Qui-Gon knew with a heavy heart that he could not rescue Obi-Wan tonight. He could not compromise the success of his mission by attempting a rescue that was doomed to fail.

Obi-Wan sat in a cell barely large enough to contain him. His knees were tucked under his chin. It was cold. The chill air against his skin was like the icy fear that gripped his heart.

Anything but this, he thought. I can stand anything but this. I can't lose my memory!

Jude Watson

He would lose all his Jedi training, all his knowledge. Any wisdom he had struggled so hard to gain. Would he lose the Force as well? He would lose the memory of how to harness it.

And what else would he lose? Friendship. All the friends he'd made at the Temple. Gentle Bant, with her sliver eyes. Garen, who he'd fought with and laughed with and who was almost as good as he was in lightsaber training. Reeft, who could never get enough to eat, and who would stare mournfully at his empty plate until Obi-Wan passed over some of his food. They had forged strong bonds, and he missed them. If he lost his memories of them, they would be dead to him.

Obi-Wan thought of his thirteenth birthday. It seemed so long ago now. He had never done his recollection exercise. Now he remembered how Qui-Gon had admonished him. *Yes, time is elusive. But it is best to track it down.*

Obi-Wan had not tracked it down. He had not made the time. Now he would have all the time in the world and nothing to remember.

He pressed his forehead against his knees, feeling the fear overwhelm him. It filled his mind with darkness. For the first time in his life, he knew what it was to lose all hope.

Then, in the midst of cold and fear, he felt a warmth inside his tunic. He reached inside to the hidden pocket against his chest. His fingers closed around the river rock Qui-Gon had given him. It was warm!

He pulled it out. The ebony stone glowed in the darkness, giving off a crystal-like gleam. He closed his fingers around it again and felt a hum against his fingertips. The stone must be Force-sensitive, he realized.

That knowledge sent beam of pure light into the darkness of his mind. *Nothing is lost where the Force dwells*, he remembered from the Temple. *And the Force is everywhere.*

Obi-Wan turned his mind to remembering what Guerra had told him about the memory wipe. Some very strong-minded beings are able to withstand some of the effects of the wipe.

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Perhaps that meant the Force could help him. For what else was the Force, but strength and light?

Obi-Wan held the stone tightly. He gathered to Force around him like a shield. He imagined it coiling around every cell in his brain like a fortress. It would hold out against the darkness, and he would hold on to his memories.

When the door to his cell opened and the guard entered, he did not even look up.

Chapter Fourteen

The marketplace was crowded the next morning, even though there was even less for sale. The desperation on the faces of the Phindians mirrored Qui-Gon's. He paced impatiently, waiting for Duenna to appear.

Finally, he could wait no longer. "I'm going to headquarters myself," he told Guerra and Paxxi grimly. "I'll find a way."

"Wait, Jedi-Gon," Guerra pleaded. "It is hard for Duenna to slip away, but she always manages it."

"And so there she is!" Paxxi cried.

Duenna threaded through the crowd toward them. She was not wearing her coat, but a cloak and hood. She carried a large satchel.

"Any news of Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon asked as soon as she came up to them.

She put a hand on her heart to catch her breath. "Headquarters in on high alert. Prince Beju arrives tomorrow –"

"What about Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon barked impatiently.

"I am trying to tell you," Duenna said. "I have never seen them act so fast. He – he was taken to a cell."

"Where?" Qui-Gon asked urgently.

"He is there no longer," Duenna said, laying a gentle hand on his arm. Suddenly, Qui-Gon noticed that her eyes were full of pity for him. His heart fell.

"What happened?" he asked hoarsely.

"He was renewed," she said, her voice breaking. "Last night. And transported off-planet at dawn this morning."

Paxxi and Guerra peered around the corner into the room where Qui-Gon sat, eyes front, cross-legged, not moving. Duenna had to return to headquarters, so they had gone straight to Kaadi's house. Being on the streets was dangerous during the day.

As soon as they entered the house, Qui-Gon had gone to the spare room where they slept. He sat down in the middle of the floor, not speaking. He had remained there for an hour. The brothers had left him alone for a time, but he could feel their anxious eyes on him.

Without opening his eyes, he said, "I'm not giving up. I'm forming a plan."

"Of course, Jedi-Gon," Guerra said, relief coursing through his voice. "We knew this."

"Yes so," Paxxi agreed. "We know Jedi do not give up. Although, we must admit we worried a tiny bit. It is such bad news about our friend Obawan."

Qui-Gon opened his eyes. He saw the same haunted desperation in the eyes of the Derida brothers that he felt in his heart. He had had to struggle to overcome his anger at himself. It had taken time to calm his mind. Time and again he had tried to formulate a plan, only to be filled with anguish at the thought of Obi-Wan's plight. He was rocked to the core. The thought of Obi-Wan without his memory, without his training, was unbearable.

He had failed his Padawan. He should have known the Syndicat would move fast. He should have tried to rescue him

Jude Watson

last night. Now Obi-Wan was doomed to a life so empty it made Qui-Gon shudder every time he tried to conceive of it.

What of Obi-Wan's Jedi training? All of that, lost. What would the boy become? He would still be Force-sensitive, for the Force was not dependent on memory. But how could Obi-Wan use it without the lessons of the Temple to guide him? If he discovered its power, he would have it without allegiance. Would he become a lost, neutral warrior for hire? Would he use the Force for darkness, like Qui-Gon's old apprentice, Xanatos?

He did not believe that could happen. He *would* not believe it. If Obi-Wan had lost his memory, surely he would still retain his goodness.

Yes, Qui-Gon was full of worry. But he was also heartbroken. The boy he knew was gone. The diligent boy, so curious and intent on knowledge. The quick study. The boy who wanted to learn.

Qui-Gon refused to believe that all that was gone. He had to hope still that somehow the memory wipe would be reversible, if he could find Obi-Wan.

"And so what are you thinking, Jedi-Gon?" Guerra asked tentatively.

"We must act tomorrow," Qui-Gon said. "We must break them wide open. What better time to act than when they are trying to impress Prince Beju? First of all, they will be distracted. And second, we can destroy their alliance with the Prince before it even begins."

"It is true so," Paxxi breathed.

"We must open the warehouses when the Prince arrives," Qui-Gon said quietly. He had formed the plan in his mind, and he believed it could be done. "Can Kaddi rally the people?"

"Yes so," Guerra said, nodding.

"That will be our diversion," Qui-Gon said. "The people will rush into the warehouses. The Syndicat will panic. There will be chaos in the streets. We will go straight to headquarters with the anti-register device. That's when we'll steal the treasury."

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“In the daytime?” Paxxi asked. “But it will be dangerous. And Duenna cannot help us then.”

Qui-Gon turned to look at them. His blue eyes burned across the room. “Are you with me?” he asked.

The two brothers looked at each other. “Yes, so,” they said together.

Chapter Fifteen

The hum from the engines underneath Obi-Wan throbbed against his skull. He had been thrown on the floor of the transport, locked into cargo hold. He kept his eyes closed. He had to keep his concentration strong. He felt completely drained. Exhausted. Sick.

But he *remembered*.

They had not broken him. They had not won.

They had entered, and he hadn't even looked up, not even when they laughed at him. He slipped the river stone into the pocket of his tunic quickly, so they would not see it and take it away. The stone kept a steady glow of heat against his heart. He had drawn strength from it. It was tangible proof that the Force was with him.

While they set up the memory-wipe droid, he had built Force walls inside himself. He had enshrined every memory, even the haziest one. He had embraced the painful with the good.

His first day at the Temple. He had been so young, so frightened. His first glimpse of Yoda, coming forward to greet him, his heavy-lidded eyes looking sleepy. "Far to come, far to go it is," he had said. "Cold and warm, it is. Seek what you are looking for, you will. Find it here, you shall. Listen."

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The sound of the fountains. The river that ran behind the Temple. The chimes that the cook had hung in a tree in the kitchen gardens. He had noticed those things then, and something in him had uncurled. He had thought, for the first time, that he could feel at home there.

A good memory.

Twin metal rods were screwed against his temples. The electro-pulsers.

The stone glowed against his heart.

A visit home. His mother. Softness and light. His father. A laugh, full-bodied, joined by his mother's, just as full, just as rich. His brother, sharing a piece of fruit with him. The explosion of sweet juice in his mouth. Soft grasses underneath his bare feet.

The droid activated the memory wipe while the guards watched. A strange sensation began in his temples and moved inward. Not pain, not quite . . .

Owen. His brother's name was Owen.

Reeft never got enough to eat.

Bant's eyes were silver.

The first time he'd drawn his lightsaber. It had glowed as he activated it. Most of the Temple students had been clumsy. He had never been clumsy. Not with his weapon. The lightsaber had always felt right in his hand.

Pain now. White hot.

The Force was bright, too. He pictured it, golden, strong, glowing, forming a barrier around his memories.

They are mine. Not yours. I'll keep them.

The Syndicat guards were surprised to see him smile.

"Happy to see that memory go, I guess," one of them said to the other.

No, it is not going. I have it. I'm holding it now . . .

Rough linen against his hands. He clung to his mother. The end of the visit. Yes, he had wanted to go back to the Temple. It was a great honor. They knew they could not keep him from it.

Jude Watson

He wanted it so much. Yet good-bye was so painful, so hard. A soft cheek pressed against his.

I carry you always.

The way dusk fell at the Temple. Slowly, because of all the lights and white buildings of Coruscant. Light took long to leave. That's when he'd go to the river with Bant. Bant loved the water. She grew up on a humid world. Her room was kept supplied with steam. She swam like a fish in the River. As dusk fell, the color of the water would match her eyes.

Pain. He felt sick. Consciousness was slippery. If he passed out, he would lose.

Yoda. Yoda he would not lose. *Strength you have, Obi-Wan. Patience you have as well, but find it, you must. It is there within you. Search you will, until you find it and hold it. Learn to use it, you must. Learn that it will save you, you will.*

He would not lose Yoda's lessons. He created a Force barrier around them. Pain crested again, sending dizziness through him. He could not last much longer.

"What's your name?" the guard asked harshly.

Obi-Wan rolled blank, sick eyes toward the guard.

"You name," the guard repeated.

Obi-Wan pretended to search, pretended to panic.

The guard laughed. "This one is cooked."

The droid detached the electro-pulsers. Obi-Wan slumped to the floor.

"He's sleep now," the guard said.

"He won't dream," the other added.

But he did.

He was hauled to his feet. A Syndicat guard leered in his face.

"Ready to face your new life?"

He kept his face blank, dazed.

"I've got money riding on this," the guard said. "You won't last three days on Gala."

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Gala! Obi-Wan kept a neutral look on his face as relief surged through him. What a stroke of luck! At least on Gala he could find a way to help Qui-Gon.

He knew Prince Beju's plans. Perhaps he could find someone on Gala, one of the rival politicians running for governor, to help.

The landing ramp slid down. He could see a gray stone spaceport lined with battered starfighters. A number of checkpoints prevented anyone from entering. Obi-Wan remembered what Qui-Gon had said. The royal house had plundered the planet. Rival factions fought for control. The people were close to revolt.

"Have fun!" the Syndicat guard chortled, and gave him a push down the ramp.

A probe droid buzzed behind Obi-Wan as he made his way cautiously through the spaceport hanger. When he reached the checkpoint, the guard waved him through. No doubt the Syndicat had bribed them to let him through without a challenge. Once he hit the streets of Gala, their fun would begin. They were betting on how long he'd survive.

Obi-Wan plunged into the teeming streets of Galu, the capital city of Gala. The small probot followed behind. Obi-Wan knew he had a camera trained on him at all times. It was hard to know what to do. How would he react to such a city if he had no memory of what he knew?

The city of Galu had once been grand and impressive. But the great stone buildings were crumbling. Obi-Wan could see the holes and depressions where ornaments had been stripped off the facades. Trees had once lined the streets, but now there were only twisted stumps.

The Galacians were humanoids whose pale skin had a bluish cast. Sunlight on the planet was limited and they were often called "moon people" due to their fair, luminous skin. Obi-Wan could see evidence of poverty everywhere. Where the

Jude Watson

atmosphere on Phindar was one of fear, here on Gala, Obi-Wan picked up anger.

Obi-Wan kept a confused look on his face. He stared into shop windows, trying to seem as though he'd never seen the items inside before. He avoided looking into strangers' eyes, wandered the streets without seeming to have a destination. All the while, however, he was heading toward the gleaming building he saw in the distance, guessing it was the grand Palace of Gala. Blue and green gemstones embedded in the towers caught the weak sunlight and made the place seem to sparkle.

Suddenly, a gigantic Galacian man blocked his path. "You," he said, placing a meaty hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder. "Do you know what I told myself when I woke up this morning?"

The probot buzzed around Obi-Wan. He resisted the temptation to react as a Jedi. He would not look into the man's eyes with clear steady courage. He would not speak firmly but respectfully in an attempt to defuse the situation. He must react in fear and confusion.

And hope he didn't get killed.

Obi-Wan let apprehension show on his face. "What?" he answered.

The huge man squeezed his shoulder painfully. "That I would slit the throat of the first hill person that I saw."

"I-I'm not a hill person," Obi-Wan said. Then he realized that without his memory he wouldn't know if he were a hill person. He pretended to look suddenly confused.

"You look like one," the Galacian said. He reached for the vibro-shiv on his belt. Obi-Wan heard it leave the sheath with a slithering noise. The blade sounded very long.

Obi-Wan's hand instinctively moved toward his lightsaber. But of course he didn't have one – the Syndicat had confiscated it. And he would tip off the probot camera if he used it anyway.

"People say I look like one," he said quickly. "All the time. I just don't understand it."

The man frowned. "You don't?"

“Because I may be ugly, but I’m not *that* ugly,” Obi-Wan said. He had no idea what a hill person was. Or what they looked like. But he knew that the only way to talk his way out of this was to make friends with his enemy.

The large man stared at him blankly. Then he threw back his head and laughed. His hand dropped from Obi-Wan’s shoulder.

Obi-Wan took a step back, smiling along with the man’s laughter. He began to edge away. Still laughing, the man tucked his vibro-shiv back into his belt and walked on.

He kept a look of fright and confusion on his face for the benefit of the probot. He had to lose the droid, he realized. If he had to rely on his wits to survive, he’d be dead by sunset.

That thought made Obi-Wan begin to smile, but he quickly masked it by coughing into his hand. He ducked down a side street. While he walked, he used the Jedi technique of looking without seeming to look. He gathered information, waiting for his chance.

Ahead, a cart loaded with vegetables was standing outside a café’s kitchen door. A cook stood outside, arguing with the driver. Obi-Wan saw a speeder bike turn the corner ahead. This could be his chance.

He quickened his pace. When he got closer to the cart, he stumbled, keeping the dazed, confused expression on his face. His fall sent him squarely into the path of the speeder bike. He saw the driver’s surprised expression before the driver turned the bike quickly to avoid running over Obi-Wan. He sideswiped the cart, which overturned. The driver of the cart began to scream at the speeder bike rider, who gunned the motor and kept going.

The cart driver pursued him, picking up vegetables as he ran and throwing them at the speeder. One of the vegetables hit the probot, which let out a warning beep and swerved in the air. Obi-Wan quickly rolled behind the cart, then ran, doubled over, into the kitchen of the café. He darted past a surprised worker stirring soup and ran into the café itself. He headed for the door and ran out into the street. Quickly, he ducked into the shop next door.

Jude Watson

A moment later he saw the probot fly out the door. It hovered on the street, revolving slowly. The camera scanned the passersby. Obi-Wan stayed hidden in the shop. Slowly, the probot began to cruise the street, revolving carefully. Obi-Wan quickly faded back into the store, then ran by the surprised shop owner and left by the alley exit.

The palace of Gala wasn't far. Obi-Wan hesitated at the ornate jeweled gates, wondering what to do. He could hardly walk in and announce himself. He assumed that the various ministers and candidates for governorship must come to the palace for meetings about the upcoming elections. Should he just stop the next important-looking person and tell him why he was there?

Obi-Wan wished Qui-Gon was with him. The Jedi Knight would know what to do. Obi-Wan's mind was too filled with possibilities and guesses. He felt exposed here on the street outside the place. He was afraid the probot would return at any moment.

Still wondering how to proceed, Obi-Wan drifted back to stand underneath the shadow of a building overhang. He watched as a small passenger spaceliner glided down from the sky. It seemed to be headed straight toward him. Obi-Wan tensed, then realized he was standing next to a small spaceport hanger.

He moved forward, still keeping in the shadow of the overhang, to watch the ship land. The ramp lowered, and the pilot got out. Someone moved forward to greet him. It was young man dressed in a long cloak and a wrapped headdress.

"I have been waiting for three minutes," the boy snapped as the pilot approached him.

"My apologies, my Prince. Equipment check took a bit longer than usual. But we are ready to fly."

Obi-Wan stiffened. It must be Prince Beju!

"Don't bore me with the Obvious," the Prince snapped. "Are my supplies loaded?"

“Yes, my Prince. Is your royal guard ready to board?”

“Don’t bore me with questions – just obey me!” Prince Beju ordered. “I expect takeoff in two minutes. I will be resting during the flight, so do not disturb me.”

Prince Beju flung his cloak behind a shoulder and stalked off. It was clear to Obi-Wan that the Prince must be heading to Phindar for the meeting with the Syndicat. Should he prevent the Prince from leaving?

No, Obi-Wan thought. He would just end up in prison, this time on Gala, if he interfered here. Better to show aboard and see if he could get back to Phindar.

Obi-Wan watched as Prince Beju disappeared up the exit ramp. He was surprised to see that Beju wasn’t much older than he was. He was the same height as Obi-Wan as well, and had the same sturdy frame . . .

The idea flashed into Obi-Wan’s mind like a powered-up lightsaber. Was it too risky? Should he attempt it?

He had only minutes to decide. Cautiously, he slipped onto the ship. Prince Beju was nowhere in sight. Obi-Wan realized that the Prince was nowhere in sight. Obi-Wan realized that the Prince’s transport that had been converted for his royal use. It was fitted with every luxury. Prince Beju was probably in his stateroom, behind the gilded door immediately to Obi-Wan right.

Obi-Wan quickly went into the cockpit. He sat for a moment, familiarizing himself with the controls. He had piloted cloud cars and air-speeders and once, a huge transport ship. This shouldn’t be too hard.

He headed back into the stateroom again and opened a closet door. One held supplies, but he found what he was looking for in the next – a row of headaddresses similar to the one the Prince wore. Obi-Wan quickly slipped one on his head, then wrapped the deep purple cloak in a rich fabric around his shoulders.

He returned to the cockpit and sat in the pilot seat. He saw the pilot heading for the ship, along with three royal guards.

Jude Watson

Quickly, Obi-Wan deactivated the exit ramp and started the ion engines. The pilot looked up, startled.

Obi-Wan could see the puzzlement on his face. The Padawan had counted on the fact that the headdress and cloak would confuse the pilot and the guards. They would assume that Prince Beju was piloting the ship. Not for long, perhaps – but if Obi-Wan was lucky, he would have enough time to take off.

The comlink suddenly blared to life. “Two minutes are up!” Prince Beju barked. “Why are we not taking off?”

“Immediately, my Prince,” Obi-Wan said crisply. He started preparations for takeoff. The ion engines revved. The pilot and the guards moved closer, trying to get a better look. Obi-Wan saw one guard’s hand move to his blaster.

“Now,” he muttered, and the ship blasted out of the atmosphere of Gala. He waited until they were in deep space. Then he tossed the headdress and cloak aside, for the moment.

A weapons cabinet was mounted on the wall of the cockpit. He selected a blaster. Then he made his way back to the Prince’s stateroom.

The Prince was reclining on a sleep couch when he entered. “I said I didn’t want to be disturbed!” he snapped, not looking up.

Obi-Wan walked closer. He placed the blaster under the Prince’s chin. “So sorry.”

The Prince twisted around to look at Obi-Wan. “Guards!” he screamed.

“They decided to stay on Gala,” Obi-Wan said.

“Get off of my ship!” Prince Beju blustered. “I’ll see you dead! Who are you? How dare you!”

“Don’t bore me with questions,” Obi-Wan said, hauling the Prince to his feet. “Just obey me.”

Chapter Sixteen

Qui-Gon, Paxxi, and Guerra found a place to hide behind a pile of repair equipment in the Syndicat hanger. They had found out from Duenna when the Prince was scheduled to arrive. Baftu and a troop of assassin droids and Syndicat guards waited on the landing platform.

The Derida brothers and Qui-Gon wore their stolen Syndicat armor coats. Even though the coats gave them some protection, it was better to keep out of sight.

Kaadi had entered enthusiastically into their plan. She, too, thought the Prince's visit would be a perfect time to strike. She had contacted her rebel operatives. All they would need was a signal from her when the warehouses were open. She had designated people to find weapons and distribute them, find good, find supplies. And when the bacta was loaded onto the Prince's ship, she would make sure that the Phindians saw it happen.

Qui-Gon couldn't imagine the fury of a people deprived so long of what they needed to live. Surely the capital would explode. That would give them plenty of diversion to break in and steal the treasury. Once the Syndicat was destroyed, peace could return to Phindar at last.

Jude Watson

So why was he so uneasy? Qui-Gon wondered. Perhaps it was because the plan seemed so simple, yet was so dependent on their guesses. What if the Prince went to headquarters first? What if Baftu double-crossed him and withheld the bacta? What if Paxxi's anti-register device didn't work? Qui-Gon had tested it on a security lock of Kaadi's, but what if the warehouse locks were different? It would have been dangerous to test it first, but should they have tried?

Perhaps he was allowing his worry about Obi-Wan to interfere with his judgment. He was anxious to bring about the Syndicat collapse so that he could find his Padawan. But was he acting rashly?

"You are worrying, Jedi-Gon," Guerra whispered. "You should not. Everything will be smooth. Paxxi and I have always been lucky."

Qui-Gon had certainly not seen any evidence to support this. But Guerra was trying to be helpful, so he nodded in thanks.

"Yes so, we guarantee this," Paxxi added in a whisper. "The Syndicat will be weakened, maybe collapse, and Prince Beju will take off with no bacta and no alliance. Just so!"

"There is the ship!" Guerra hissed.

The Prince's ship came into view, sleek and white. It glided to a perfect landing. The ramp slowly lowered. Qui-Gon tensed. Now everything would begin.

The Prince slowly walked down the ramp alone. First, Qui-Gon was surprised. He had assumed the Prince would arrive with a royal guard.

Then he felt a rush of familiarity. But why? It took him several long seconds to realize that it was Obi-Wan in disguise.

Joy filled his heart. His Padawan was alive!

But quickly, joy was followed by confusion. Had Obi-Wan lost his memory and somehow become mixed up in affairs on Gala? That would be an incredible coincidence. How had he met Prince Beju?

“Look at him,” Paxxi said in disgust. “You can tell the brute is evil.”

“Look closer. The boy is Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon murmured.

Paxxi gasped. “Yes so, I thought he seemed handsome and brave,” he added quickly. “And what royal bearing he has!”

“Obawan! I am overjoyed!” Guerra exulted, his voice a whisper. Then his face fell. “But what can we do, wise Knight Jedi-Gon? We can’t follow our plan now. If we alert the people that the Prince is taking the bacta, we will put Obi-Wan in great danger.”

“Do you think Obawan had been memory-wiped?” Paxxi whispered. “What if the Syndicat is using him?”

“I don’t know what to think,” Qui-Gon said quietly, his eyes on Obi-Wan as the boy greeted Baftu.

There was only one thing he could do. Qui-Gon concentrated and reached out to the Force. He gathered it in, then directed it toward Obi-Wan like a cresting wave.

He waited, every muscle tense, every cell on alert. His heart cried out for his Padawan to hear him.

He felt Obi-Wan catch the Force and send it back to him. It broke over him like a glorious waterfall.

Qui-Gon closed his eyes in sweet relief. “It is all right,” he told Paxxi and Guerra. “He has withstood the memory wipe.”

Paxxi and Guerra exchanged stunned glances.

“No one has ever done this completely,” Paxxi said.

“I knew he could,” Guerra affirmed. “Not so, I lie. I feared for my great friend Obawan. And now I feel relief and joy.”

“Me as well, good brother,” Paxxi said. The two brothers looped their long arms around each other and hugged, their faces close together and smiling.

But Qui-Gon was worried. Guerra was right. They could endanger Obi-Wan with their plan. But did Obi-Wan have his own plan? Had the boy gotten himself into deeper trouble?

Qui-Gon sighed. He would have to wait. He must take no action until he knew what Obi-Wan had in mind.

Jude Watson

One of the Jedi lessons Qui-Gon had impressed upon the boy again and again was the necessary activity of waiting. Activity can endanger, he had told him. To wait and to watch is the more difficult task, yet it is one we must master.

If only he had taught himself the lesson as well.

Obi-Wan felt the Force hit him like a wave. The knowledge that Qui-Gon was near gave him courage.

He had worried that Terra might change her mind and appear at the platform to greet Prince Beju. She would recognize him instantly, he was sure. And though he had locked the Prince in storage in the cargo hold, he worried that the Prince would be able to make enough noise to carry beyond the ship. He needed to get Baftu away as soon as possible.

"Welcome, Prince Beju," Baftu said as he approached. "I'm surprised to find you alone. Did you pilot yourself?"

"I thought it best to come alone," Obi-Wan said in a loud voice, hoping that Qui-Gon could hear. "I must confess that I have doubts about this alliance."

Baftu's smile faded. "But we have agreed on all terms."

"Yes, but I risk more than you," Obi-Wan said. "You make grand claims that I must trust you can fulfill. You speak of goods I have not seen." Obi-Wan waved a hand. "You talk of bacta supplies, of a great treasury you will share to help me win back Gala. But I have not seen them.

Baftu's smile was strained. "But of course you shall. To headquarters, then. We can take refreshment, and —"

"No. The bacta first," Obi-Wan interrupted sharply.

"But I have prepared a feast," Baftu said. "We can go over details. Wasn't it you who said you would need refreshment after the journey?"

"Do not bore me with question!" Obi-Wan snapped. "Just obey me. The bacta first. Then the treasury. Or I will bet back on my ship and return home."

STAR WARS: The Hidden Past

Baftu's annoyance was visible. "Did we not agree that it would be better to load the bacta under cover of darkness? If my people see the amount of bacta we have, it could be dangerous for both of us."

Obi-Wan flung the cape over his shoulder. "Can you not control your people, Baftu? Are you afraid of them? This makes me uneasy."

For a moment, Obi-Wan thought that Baftu would strike him down. But the alliance was all important to him. Baftu's small, cunning eyes narrowed, and he forced a smile. "As the Prince wishes, of course. Let us load the bacta."

"Excellent," Qui-Gon said to Guerra and Paxxi in a low voice. "Obi-Wan is stalling for time. We'll have to change our plan. First the treasure, then the warehouses. Alert Kaadi that the Prince will be loading the bacta. And the, follow me."

Chapter Seventeen

Paxxi and Guerra tried their emergency signal to get Duenna's help, but after waiting a few minutes, Qui-Gon determined that they would have to get inside Syndicat headquarters without her.

"But how, Jedi-Gon?" Guerra asked. "Blast our way in? Create a diversion?"

"Let's hope there's some confusion since the Prince is here. Things won't be routine. So we'll just walk in," Qui-Gon said, lowering his dark visor.

They strode past the guard with a nod. The second one was harder. He asked for their order number.

"Prince Beju has changed plans. He wants to load the bacta first," Qui-Gon answered. "Baftu has sent us here."

"Without an order number?" the guard asked skeptically.

"Yes, we'll go in," Qui-Gon said, bringing the Force to bear on the Phindian.

"Yes, go on in," the guard said, waving them through.

The security beams were turned off on the rear entrance, most likely because so many guards were going in and out. They were not challenged as they made their way down the halls toward the staircase to the lower level.

Qui-Gon led them to the secret room and activated the wall shift. Quickly, they headed for the security door.

“Now, it’s your turn,” Qui-Gon said to Paxxi. He fervently hoped that Paxxi’s device would work.

Paxxi jacked into the security panel. Qui-Gon heard a series of electronic beeps. Then he pressed his thumbprint against the transfer register. A beep followed. Then the light turned green, and the door opened.

“It worked, good brother!” Guerra cried. Qui-Gon wished he didn’t sound quite so surprised.

The room was filled with treasures. Gems, spice, currencies, rare metals.

“We’ll need transport,” Qui-Gon said. “We can’t get all of this out of the building, so we’ll have to hide it.”

Paxxi and Guerra hurried back to the holding pen at the staircase to get the floaters they’d hidden there. Qui-Gon stacked the materials. Then they loaded them onto the floaters and took them to the supply closet. The closet could barely hold everything, but they were able to shut the door.

“Now we have to get to the warehouses,” Qui-Gon said.

Paxxi closed the security door and reset the transfer register. They quickly left the secret room and closed the wall again. They hurried up the stairs and took the back entrance.

As they rounded the corner of the grand mansion toward the front gates, Qui-Gon held up a hand. “Wait,” he murmured.

Baftu’s gold speeder pulled up. Baftu and Obi-Wan emerged, followed by the assassin droids.

“It is better to let my guards load your ship,” Baftu was saying to the boy he thought was the Prince. “They will do it quickly and efficiently, I assure you. Now you will view the treasury.”

“I am pleased,” Obi-Wan replied.

“You see, Jedi-Gon?” Paxxi whispered. “Our plan is working.”

“We are lucky brothers,” Guerra agreed.

Just then, Terra emerged from Syndicat headquarters. She started down the stairs. Obi-Wan reached behind him to draw his cloak up around his face, but it was too late.

Jude Watson

Terra pointed. “You are not Prince Beju!” she cried.

Chapter Eighteen

Obi-Wan's mind worked quickly. Terra had recognized him. But it was still her word against his. He would have to bluff his way through.

He turned to Baftu. "Who is this who dares to challenge me?"

"My partner, Terra," Baftu said. "What are you saying?" he asked Terra fiercely. "You have never met the Prince."

"This man is a rebel." Terra insisted, drawing her blaster. "I ordered his memory wipe myself."

In the shadows, Qui-Gon's hand went to his lightsaber. Paxxi and Guerra drew their blasters, prepared to fight. They followed Qui-Gon's lead, waiting to see what Obi-Wan would do.

"If I resemble some petty criminal on your world, that is not my affair," Obi-Wan said contemptuously. He narrowed his eyes as he looked at Baftu. "Is this a ruse to deflect me from inspecting your treasury? I am already unsure about this alliance. . ."

"No, no," Baftu soothed. "Do not listen to my partner. Let us go down to the vault."

Obi-Wan nodded shortly.

"I'm coming, too," Terra said grimly.

"What shall we do, Jedi-Gon?" Guerra whispered. "Danger is not past for Obawan."

Jude Watson

Qui-Gon had already decided. "Paxxi, go to the warehouses with your device and open them. We must proceed with the plan. Contact Kaadi and start distributing food and weapons." Qui-Gon put a hand on Paxxi's shoulder. "I know you want to stay and help Obi-Wan. But a diversion will help him more than you can here."

Paxxi nodded and fled.

"Guerra, come with me," Qui-Gon said.

They attached themselves to the rear of the groups with Baftu and Obi-Wan.

"Terra is excitable," Baftu said to Obi-Wan. "Do not listen to her."

"So you have an excitable partner who is not to be listened to," Obi-Wan said. "That does not sound wise."

Terra drifted closer to them. When Baftu turned to give an order to a droid, she murmured in Obi-Wan's ear, "No matter what Baftu thinks, I know you're a fake. I don't know how you resisted that memory wipe, but I'll find out. And I'll kill you in a heartbeat."

"Only droids downstairs," Baftu ordered briskly as they approached the stairs to the storage room. "Guards, wait here."

Qui-Gon and Guerra waited until the group was all downstairs. Then they crept after them, keeping out of sight.

Baftu activated the sliding wall. They entered the sanctuary. Qui-Gon and Guerra hovered outside, waiting. They peered inside the crack in the wall as Baftu pressed his print against the transfer register. The security door opened.

They heard Baftu's cry of dismay. Terra rushed forward.

"What is this?" she exclaimed. "Where is the treasury?"

Baftu turned to her. His face was a mask of rage. "Now I see why you were against this meeting. And why you accused the Prince of being an imposter. You had already stolen my treasure!"

"*Your* treasure! It is as much mine as yours!" Terra said angrily.

“So you admit that you stole it,” Baftu said. His voice had dropped to a low, threatening tone.

“Of course I didn’t steal it!” Terra said, exasperated. “Something is going on here, Baftu. This Prince is an imposter. Someone is trying to discredit me, or you – listen to me!”

Baftu turned. He nodded at the assassin droids.

It happened before anyone could move or even blink. The assassin droids fired their built-in blasters at Terra. There was a moment where she stood, her expression blank and uncomprehending.

“You fool.” She said to Baftu, and fell.

Baftu stepped over her body as though it was stray garbage on the street. He placed his hand on Obi-Wan’s elbow. “Come, Prince Beju. I have taken care of the traitor. It is a matter of time before I find where she hid the treasury. This is nothing. It will not interfere with our plans.”

Qui-Gon had to pull at a shocked Guerra to get him to fade back into the next room. They waited there while Baftu left with Obi-Wan and the assassin droids. They could hear Baftu still reassuring Obi-Wan as they walked away.

As soon as they were out of sight, Qui-Gon and Guerra rushed into the sanctuary. Terra lay in the doorway of the treasury room.

Guerra knelt next to her. Tenderly, he reached one long arm underneath her body and raised her to cradle her against him.

Terra looked up at him. The light in her bright orange eyes was fading. “You don’t remember me,” Guerra said brokenly.

Terra’s eyes cleared. For a moment, they blazed bright as memory rushed back. “No so, brother,” she said softly. She reached up a trembling hand and touched Guerra’s cheek. “No so.”

Her eye lids fluttered closed. She curled one arm around Guerra’s neck, rested her head against him, and died.

Chapter Nineteen

They heard a cry behind them. Qui-Gon turned. Duenna stood in the doorway, her hand at her heart.

“My good mother,” Guerra said, his orange eyes full of tears. “Our Terra is gone.”

Duenna knelt beside her daughter. Guerra put Terra in her arms.

Qui-Gon touched Guerra’s shoulder. “We must go, my good friend,” he said. “If a battle begins, Obi-Wan will be in great danger. Your people will think he’s taking all the bacta.”

Duenna looked at her son as she cradled Terra. Her eyes were clear. “Yes so, my son. You must go. Your sister must not die in vain.”

Qui-Gon only paused to lift Obi-Wan’s lightsaber from the weapons rack near the door. They hurried through the street toward the warehouses.

They heard the commotion from blocks away. Blaster fire and shouting punctured what sounded like one continuous roar of rage. Qui-Gon and Guerra began to run.

As they drew closer, they began to see Phindians, their arms full of supplies, rushing past them. Qui-Gon knew the plan Kaadi had devised. She had designated runners to deliver food

and medicine to the sick and restock the hospitals with medical supplies.

They rounded the last corner to the warehouses. Qui-Gon saw in a quick glance that Paxxi and Kaadi had done their work well. They had passed out weapons to the rebels, who held a line of resistance against the Syndicat guards. Behind that line, Phindians passed supplies from hand to hand, passing the supplies to runners who took off with them.

He saw Paxxi toss a proton grenade into a sea of Syndicat guards. Kaadi ran forward with a force pike and attacked a guard trying to blast a runner with her hands full of medpacs.

Qui-Gon quickly made his way to Paxxi's side. "Have you seen Obi-Wan?"

Paxxi shook his head. "Maybe his is by his ship."

But then Qui-Gon saw him in the midst of the Syndicat guards. Baftu stood nearby, watching the battle. Qui-Gon watched as Obi-Wan slipped a blaster from a guard's holster without him noticing. Qui-Gon sent out the Force to his Padawan, and Obi-Wan looked over the crowd straight at him. He nodded.

Qui-Gon powered up both lightsabers. They arced green and blue, glowing in the gray air. Obi-Wan leaped forward over the Syndicat guards. Qui-Gon tossed his Padawan's lightsaber high in the air. It revolved slowly, turning in a graceful arc. Obi-Wan reached out his hand and the hilt of his lightsaber landed in his palm. As he landed, he slashed out at the front line of Syndicat guards. Baftu gaped at Obi-Wan, frozen with shock to see the boy he knew as Prince Beju on the attack.

"Kill him!" he screamed at the guards.

Qui-Gon was already moving forward himself, adding to Obi-Wan's assault with his own frontal attack. They now knew where the Syndicat guards were vulnerable, and they did not waste time directing blows at their armor. Instead, they slashed out at ankles and necks, and managed to flip off the armored visors so they would have clear shots to disable them.

Jude Watson

The Force was around them, guiding them. Obi-Wan felt its power as it battled against the dark side of the cruel Syndicat guards. He felt the good energy of the Phindians at his back, helping him. His blows landed where he aimed, and he evaded blaster fire with the help of the Force, which told him when to twist, move, leap, and block.

The success of the Jedi empowered the Phindians. The surged forward, crying in rage. Qui-Gon saw Baftu suddenly pale as the line of Syndicat guards broke. Guerra was the first to leap forward, a blaster in one hand and a bowcaster in the other. He drew back the bow of the bowcaster, and the laser shot out, straight at Baftu.

Baftu cried out and grabbed a Syndicat guard. He blocked the blow with the guard, who fell. Baftu turned and ran, with Guerra in pursuit.

Obi-Wan leaped over a pile of fallen Syndicat guards and took off after Baftu and Guerra. Qui-Gon evaded a blow from a force pike easily and swiveled, looking for Paxxi.

He spotted Paxxi and Kaadi off to his right. They had been surrounded by Syndicat guards with electro-jabbers. Qui-Gon cut down a guard heading toward him and leaped high over whoever was in his way. He hit the ground and used the momentum to leap up onto a partially collapsed wall.

But he was too late. A Syndicat guard jabbed Paxxi, whose arm went numb, and he dropped his blaster. Kaadi rushed to help Paxxi as another guard fired.

The blaster fire hit Kaadi, and she fell. With his good arm, Paxxi threw the anti-register device he held at the guard. Blaster fire hit the device, causing it to ricochet back at the guard. Qui-Gon leaped into the fray, his lightsaber humming. He struck the killing blow at the guard, then turned to the next. Together, he and Paxxi finished off the rest of the guards.

Paxxi knelt by Kaadi.

“Don’t look so sad,” Kaadi said weakly. “I’m still alive.”

Qui-Gon quickly tossed two blasters to Paxxi. “Stay with her,” he told him.

Quickly, he turned and ran. He found a medic who was distributing supplies and directed her toward Paxxi and Kaadi. Then he headed for the spaceport.

When he reached it, Baftu was surrounded by assassin droids and Syndicat guards. Prince Beju’s ship stood, half loaded with bacta. While the guards protected Baftu, Phindians hurriedly unloaded the bacta from the cargo hold under fire. More and more rebels appeared to cover the line of those unloading bacta. Guerra and Obi-Wan were in the thick of it. Qui-Gon saw the blue glow of Obi-Wan’s lightsaber slashing and jabbing as the boy moved, evading blaster fire.

Qui-Gon hurried to support Obi-Wan. But before he could strike a single blow, Baftu suddenly turned and dashed toward the entry ramp of the ship.

“He’s trying to escape!” Guerra shouted. He turned to the guards. “You see where your leader’s loyalty lies – with himself only!”

Baftu stumbled as he reached the ramp. The Syndicat guards turned. The closest one tackled Baftu and brought him down. They both rolled to the bottom of the ramp.

Guerra hurried forward. He placed his blaster against Baftu’s head. “I arrest you in the name of the Phindian people,” he cried.

“Kill the rebel!” Baftu screamed at the guards.

The Syndicat guards exchanged glances. Their arms dropped to their sides.

“Destroy him!” Baftu screamed again, this time to the assassin droids.

But Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon leaped as one from opposite ends. Lightsabers flashing, they cut the droids down like twigs.

Ion engines suddenly roared to life. The ship began to move.

“Prince Beju,” Obi-Wan said. “He must have escaped from the cargo hold.”

The ship rose slowly, jerkily, into the air.

Jude Watson

“Let him go,” Qui-Gon said. “His fate lies elsewhere.”

Chapter Twenty

The following week, Obi-Wan Qui-Gon, Paxxi and Guerra stood in the town market. Around them the same stalls that had been empty so long were heaped with abundance. Supplies, fresh fruit, circuits for navi-computers, bedding, blankets. Phindians milled about with baskets on their arms brimming with fresh food and flowers.

Yoda had asked the Jedi to remain on Phindar until the provisional government had been set up. The process had taken a few days to arrange. Currently, a coalition of former council members and the last official governor of Phindar were running the planet's affairs. Elections were planned for the following month for the next official governor.

Baftu and his top lieutenants were being held in a high-security prison awaiting trial. Most of the Syndicat guards had been memory-wiped by Baftu, and some had returned to their families in hopes that love and care would restore any memories remaining.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon had met the Derida brothers in the marketplace in order to view Paxxi's monument. He had destroyed the memory-wipe droid and mounted the scraps on a pedestal for all Phindians to see. The shuddered at the sight of it, and were fervently glad it had been dismantled for good.

Jude Watson

"It was an excellent idea, good brother," Guerra said the Paxxi. "Evil must be faced in order to be conquered."

"Yes so, good brother," Paxxi agreed.

"How is Kaadi?" Qui-Gon asked. "Better, I hope."

Paxxi grinned. "Already ordering her medics around. She will be back at home at the end of the week."

Guerra glanced around the marketplace, a look of sudden sadness on his face. "I am content," he said. "Not so, I lie. So much evil has been conquered, yes. But on this day I hoped also to have Terra with us as she was."

"She died as she once was, good brother," Paxxi said, his face a mirror of Guerra's sadness. He slung his long arm around his brother. Guerra did the same. They faced each other and sighed.

"We are sad, yet not so," Guerra said.

"Yes so," Paxxi said. "Our world is free, and we have the wise Jedi-Gon and the brave Obawan to thank."

"There's only one problem," Obi-Wan said. "Now that there is plenty for all again on Phindar, there's no black market. What will you do?"

"Excellent point, Obawan," Guerra said. "I, too, have wondered this. Especially since my good brother destroyed the anti-register device."

"He saved Kaadi's life," Qui-Gon pointed out.

"Just so," Guerra admitted. "Yet the sale of the device would have brought us great riches."

"It would have brought about your downfall," Obi-Wan said. "There was evil surrounding that device. You were able to use it for good. But most would not."

"As usual, you are most wise, Obawan," Guerra admitted with a sigh. "Yet it was so much fortune to lose."

"And we still do not know what we shall do," Paxxi said. "We have been rebels for so long, and thieves even longer. There is no place for us here on our beloved world."

Qui-Gon looked amused. "I wouldn't say that. What about the upcoming elections? Phindar will need a new governor. You

two are heroes at the moment. Why doesn't one of you run for the post?"

Guerra laughed. "Me, governor? Ha, I laugh at Jedi-Gon's joke! I would make such a terrible politician. Wait, I lie! I would be magnificent!"

"You would make the better governor, good brother," Paxxi said. "Wait, I lie as well! I would be better! I shall run!"

"Well, you'll have to decide between yourselves," Qui-Gon said. "It is time for us to part. Obi-Wan and I must get to Gala."

"I will take you!" Paxxi cried. "It would be my happiness!"

"Thank you, but we have a transport ship," Qui-Gon said. "This time, I would like to reach my destination."

Guerra reached out to clasp Obi-Wan's hands. "You are my great good friend, Obawan. If you ever need the service of the new governor of Phindar, you have only to ask."

"To ask me!" Paxxi said cheerfully.

"Not so, my good brother," Guerra said. "Me."

"Farewell," Qui-Gon said. "We will meet again, I'm sure."

The brothers said good-bye by wrapping their long arms around the Jedi at once and squeezing three times. When Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan walked away, the Derida brothers were still arguing over who would return for governor.

Qui-Gon was still smiling as they headed for the spaceport. "Our next mission will be far more difficult, I fear," he said. "But the stability of Gala is crucial to this star system. We're needed there more than ever."

"I'm not looking forward to meeting up with Prince Beju again," Obi-Wan admitted. "I hope he doesn't win the election."

"We are there merely to observe," Qui-Gon reminded him.

"Yes, that is always true," Obi-Wan said. "Yet we always seem to end up in the middle of things."

They entered the spaceport where their transport was waiting.

"I'm glad of one thing, Padawan," Qui-Gon said. "You have held on to your memories."

Jude Watson

“Your river stone helped me,” Obi-Wan said, placing his hand over his inner pocket. “I did not realize the stone was Force-sensitive. I should have known you would have given me something of great value.”

“Force-sensitive?” Qui-Gon frowned. “What do you know? I thought it was just a pretty rock.”

Obi-Wan gave him a startled glance. Qui-Gon’s face was impassive as he strode toward the transport. Was his Master kidding or serious? He had no idea.

They started up the entry ramp. A smile stole over Obi-Wan’s face. Another mission lay ahead. Perhaps through its trials he would grow to understand Qui-Gon. But somehow he thought not. It would likely take a lifetime before he figured his Master out.

Book Four
The Mark of the Crown

Chapter One

As soon as Obi-Wan Kenobi and Qui-Gon Jinn stepped off the departure ramp of their transport onto the planet of Gala, a cloud car purred to a stop at their feet.

The door opened noiselessly. A ramp slid down. A driver dressed in a navy tunic and pants scrambled out, then waited by the open door. Inside, Obi-Wan glimpsed a luxurious interior.

“Queen Veda has sent her personal transport for the Jedi,” the driver announced.

“Please thank the Queen for her hospitality,” Qui-Gon said with a small bow. “It is such a fine day. We prefer to walk to the palace.”

The driver looked startled. “But the Queen instructed me to—”

“Thank you,” Qui-Gon said firmly, and walked past the driver.

Obi-Wan followed his Master. He knew that the weather had nothing to do with why Qui-Gon had decided to walk. A Jedi mission began the moment a Jedi’s feet touched the surface of a new planet. Every sense he or she had was to be focused on the surroundings. Attunement to sight, smell, sound, and touch helped to bring the Force to bear. It was said that some Jedi

Jude Watson

Masters could see all the way to the end of a mission just by taking a few short steps on a new world.

Thirteen-year-old Obi-Wan wasn't a Master—or even a Jedi Knight—yet. As an apprentice, he had a long journey ahead. But even an apprentice could feel the dark tremors rippling under the calm surface of Galu, the capital city of Gala. Obi-Wan couldn't see to the end of the mission, but he could already sense that success would be hard-won, and far from assured.

They exited the spaceport and entered the wide boulevards of the city. Galu was a city built on three hills. On top of the tallest hill was the gleaming white palace, visible from any point on the city streets.

Gala had once been a prosperous planet, the jewel of its system. It still had its share of rich citizens, but the gap between those with wealth and those without was wide. Even as cloud cars almost as luxurious as the Queen's hummed by, beggars groveled for credits and food on the city streets.

Obi-Wan had been to Galu on his last mission. He had already seen the decay behind the once-grand buildings. The stone was chipped and weathered, and had not been restored. Graceful lindemor trees had once bloomed along the wide boulevards, but now they stood abandoned, dead, and twisted, rising up from the ground like clawing fingers.

"The Queen has made the right decision," Qui-Gon remarked. "Elections should stabilize the planet. It is time for democracy to come to Gala."

"Past time, it seems to me," Obi-Wan agreed. "Why do you think Queen Veda made the decision now?"

"There was great danger of a civil war here," Qui-Gon said. "The Tallah dynasty has ruled for a thousand years. They were successful at one time. But power can corrupt. After King Cana died, the Queen knew that the power of the monarchy was slipping. She gave in to the people's wishes and opened the government to elections."

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“Which is why her son, Prince Beju, may be dangerous,” Obi-Wan said. “How do you think the Prince will react when he sees us?”

Just days ago, the Jedi had thwarted the Prince’s scheme to become a hero to the Galacian people. Prince Beju had caused a bacta shortage on Gala. Bacta was a substance used to heal wounds and regenerate damaged flesh. Its miraculous properties saved lives. After he’d created the fake shortage, the Prince had made an agreement with the Syndicat, an illegal political group on neighboring Phindar, to bring some of their bacta home with him. Obi-Wan had foiled the plan by posing as the Prince and helping Phindar’s citizens remove the Syndicat from power.

“I don’t think he’ll greet me with open arms,” Obi-Wan continued. “After all, I *did* kidnap him.”

“He has much to lose if he opposes us,” Qui-Gon pointed out. “He might have had help with that bacta scheme, but I’m fairly certain it wasn’t from Queen Veda. If we keep silent about what we know happened on Phindar, no doubt the Prince will as well.”

“Good,” Obi-Wan said.

“But he will still see us as the enemy,” Qui-Gon added.

Inwardly, Obi-Wan gave a sigh. Qui-Gon often told him reassuring news, only to contradict it in the next sentence. It was his way of telling Obi-Wan that situations were not fixed, but fluid. “Count on nothing. Only change,” Qui-Gon had told him several times. He was always right.

Suddenly, Obi-Wan felt a disturbance in the Force like a dark wave.

“Yes,” Qui-Gon murmured.

They stopped for a moment. The street they had turned down was deserted. And then they heard the sound of shouting.

They moved together, without speaking, toward the sound. Neither one reached for his lightsaber, or even rested a hand on the hilt. But every nerve was poised, on alert.

Jude Watson

Suddenly, a crowd surged around a corner, heading for them. They carried laser-pulsating signs that spelled out DECA.

Obi-Wan relaxed. It was a political rally, he realized. Deca Brun was one of the candidates for Governor of Gala.

“Already democracy is working,” he observed. The people cheered as the laser sign flashed gold, then blue.

Qui-Gon was still alert. “Something else,” he murmured. He turned to look back.

From an intersecting narrow street behind them, another crowd suddenly spilled onto the boulevard. They bore signs reading WILA PRAMMI.

“Wila Prammi, the third candidate,” Obi-Wan noted. Yoda had briefed the Jedi on the two candidates opposing Prince Beju.

The Deca Brun crowd surged forward, and the Prammi supporters ran to meet them. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon were caught in the middle. All of a sudden, signs were used as clubs, and fists and feet flew as the two groups attacked each other.

Obi-Wan looked at Qui-Gon. This was not a time for lightsabers. Neither of the two groups had blast weapons. But still, the Jedi were in danger. They were in the middle of a brawling mob.

A burly Galacian man holding a laser sign suddenly lunged at Obi-Wan, his sign held high. Leading with his left shoulder, Obi-Wan went into a roll. He sprang to his feet only meters away as the sign glanced off someone else’s shoulder.

Two Deca supporters held Qui-Gon’s arms as a third pulled a fist back to strike him. Qui-Gon employed a classic Jedi escape technique, twisting his body and striking upward with his head. The two Deca supporters were left with sore arms and ringing ears. They looked around for Qui-Gon, but he was already gone, heading for Obi-Wan at the sidelines.

“We can’t do anything here,” he told Obi-Wan. “Let’s keep moving.”

They dodged a Wila Prammi supporter as she tripped a Deca supporter, then smashed him on the head. “The road to

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democracy can be a rough one,” Qui-Gon observed as they hurried past. “But on Gala, it seems rougher than most.”

Chapter Two

The Grand Palace of Gala rose before them, an impressive, sprawling white building with two tall towers. Surrounding the windows and inlaid in the tower spires were sparkling blue azurite crystals and gems in mosaic patterns. The roof was gilded.

Together the gold roof and glittering mosaics made the palace shimmer, as if it weren't quite real.

The Jedi were led through vast hallways to the receiving room, where Queen Veda waited. She was dressed in a gown of shimmersilk that appeared to change color when she moved. Different shades of blue and green were sewn in fluttering panels that appeared and disappeared as she walked forward to greet them. Her gold headdress was studded with blue and green crystals.

Qui-Gon barely made note of her elegant dress. He was shocked to feel her living Force. Or rather to not feel it. It was so dim. The Queen was only in middle age, yet he sensed a serious disturbance, as if she were extremely ill, or dying.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan bowed their greeting.

"I welcome the Jedi to Gala," the Queen said. Her voice still rang with firm authority. Qui-Gon wondered if she had gathered her strength for the meeting, wanting to appear well. Galacians were known for their distinctive pale skin, a bluish tone they

called “moonlight.” But the Queen’s skin was not luminous, but an unhealthy-looking color reminiscent of bone.

“We have brought a shipment of bacta as a gift,” Qui-Gon told her. “We left it at the spaceport loading dock.”

“It is desperately needed here,” the Queen answered. “Thank you. I’ll arrange to have it distributed to the med centers.”

Qui-Gon watched her face carefully. He read only relief and gratitude in her pale blue eyes, the color of ice shadows. She gave no indication that she’d heard even a whisper about Prince Beju’s plan.

Still puzzled about her health, Qui-Gon studied her the way a Jedi studies, without seeming to stare. He was surprised when she boldly captured his gaze, her sharp eyes knowing.

“Yes,” she said softly. “You are right. I am dying.”

Qui-Gon felt Obi-Wan’s start of surprise next to him. He knew the boy had not noticed the Queen’s illness. Obi-Wan had excellent instincts, but often he lacked a connection to the living Force.

“My condition simplifies meetings such as this,” Queen Veda continued, waving a jeweled hand. “I can be direct, and I hope you will be the same.”

“We are always direct,” Qui-Gon answered.

Queen Veda nodded. She lowered herself into a gilded chair and gestured for the Jedi to do so as well.

“I have thought a great deal about what I wish to leave behind,” she began. “Gala needs to be a democracy. The people have asked for it, and I have granted it as my last act as Queen. That will be my legacy. There is great unrest here in the city, and in the countryside. My husband, King Cana, ruled for thirty years. His intentions were good, but corruption invaded our council of ministers and the governors of the surrounding provinces. A handful of powerful families controlled the high posts. My husband was not able to stop it. Now I am afraid of civil war. The only thing that can prevent it will be free elections. So you see why I have asked for Jedi monitoring.”

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Qui-Gon nodded. “What do you foresee as problems we might encounter?” he asked carefully. He didn’t want to bring up Prince Beju. He wanted the Queen to introduce the topic. That would tell him where her sympathies resided.

“My son, Beju,” she said flatly. “The last in line of the great Tallah dynasty—a fact he does not let you forget for a moment. All his life he has waited to rule Gala. He has not forgiven me for calling elections. He will be some trouble for you, I’m afraid. If he wins the election, he will retain the monarchy.” She shrugged. “He has some support. But what he cannot inspire, he will buy or steal, I’m afraid.”

Qui-Gon nodded, trying not to show his surprise at the mother’s harsh words about her son.

“I will not oppose my son,” Queen Veda continued. “It is true that I’ve denied him his birthright. I owe him my loyalty at least. I won’t endorse another candidate publicly. But privately, I wish my son to lose. It is not only best for Gala. It is best for Beju. I wish him to become a private citizen, to be rid of all this.” She waved her hand to take in the immense chamber. “I saw what this power did to my husband. It corrupted him, and he was a good man. I do not want to see my son suffer the same fate. He’s only sixteen. He will understand in time why I’ve done this. *He* is also my legacy,” Queen Veda finished softly. “I wish to leave behind a son with a life that is good.”

“Do you think he has a chance to win?” Qui-Gon asked.

The Queen frowned. “There is still a core of royalist supporters. The Prince has been secluded for much of his life, since we feared for his safety. He was even schooled off-planet. Not much is known about him, and that can work in his favor. He might be able to squeak by. I do hope not.”

Queen Veda smiled at Qui-Gon. “You are surprised at my honesty. When time runs out, you don’t waste it by fooling yourself.”

“What about the other candidates, Deca Brun and Wila Prammi?” Obi-Wan asked. “Is there a favorite?”

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“Deca Brun is favored,” Queen Veda answered. “He’s a hero to the Galacian people. He promises them reform and prosperity. It won’t be that easy, but he makes it sound so.”

“And Wila Prammi?” Qui-Gon prompted.

“She has more experience,” the Queen replied. “She was an underminister here at the palace. Her ideas are sound and grounded in reality. Unfortunately, her palace experience hurts her in some quarters, and her bluntness hurts her in others. She has her faction, but is expected to lose.”

“Were you anticipating violence?” Qui-Gon asked. “We ran into some supporters on the street. Tempers are running high.”

“Yes, there have been clashes,” the Queen admitted. “But I believe the people want a peaceful transition. As long as they feel the elections are honest, they won’t revolt, I hope.”

Queen Veda sat silently for a moment. Qui-Gon wondered if she was fading. Then he realized that she was gathering herself to say something. He knew that what she would tell them next was the real reason she had summoned them here. He glanced at Obi-Wan to make sure the boy would wait for the Queen to speak. Obi-Wan nodded.

“There is a wild card,” the Queen said at last. “Another factor that is important for you to understand. Elan.”

“Elan?” Qui-Gon had not heard this name before.

“There is a faction of Galacians known as the hill people,” Queen Veda explained. She smoothed the tiled mosaic of the table in front of her and a piece of blue azurite came off in her hand. She rolled it in her palm, her rings flashing in the sunlight that poured through the window behind her. “Elan is their leader. The hill people are exiles who opposed the monarchy and gathered in the rough mountain terrain outside the capital city to live outside its laws. They recognize no king or queen. They are rumored to be ferocious, unfriendly. They never stay in one place for long. They raise their own food and have their own healers. They are rarely seen by outsiders. Yet they are greatly feared and

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hated. Elan herself is a legend, almost a ghost. I have not managed to find one person who has actually seen her.”

“Will they vote in the election?” Qui-Gon asked.

Queen Veda shook her head. “No. They have refused. They were courted by both Deca Brun and Wila Prammi, but Elan refused to meet with them. She will not recognize the new governor, just as she never recognized King Cana or myself.”

“If this is true, why do you call Elan a factor in the election?” Qui-Gon asked.

“Ah,” the Queen said. “The last piece slips into place.” She slid the piece of azurite back in the mosaic design. “Now the picture is complete.”

Obi-Wan shot Qui-Gon an impatient look. Queen Veda stared down at the mosaic, lost in thought. She had gone back to the past, Qui-Gon realized.

Long moments passed before she raised her head again. “I admire your patience, Qui-Gon Jinn,” she said quietly. “I wish I had that gift.”

“It is not a gift, but a lesson to be relearned daily,” Qui-Gon responded with a smile.

She smiled back at him, nodding slightly. “Yes, I am learning that. Which brings me to my story. When my husband, King Cana, was young, he fell in love. Our marriage had been arranged, you see. I lived in another city. We had never met. King Cana broke his vow to me and secretly married another woman. She was one of the hill people. Naturally, the Council of Ministers was outraged. They had already arranged our marriage. And the fact that King Cana had married a hill person was unacceptable. The Ministers’ influence was great. They forced him to relinquish the woman. When he told his wife that he had decided to obey them, she left the city and returned to her people. He did not know it, but she was with child.”

The Queen smoothed the mosaic with a hand that shook slightly. “King Cana later discovered this. Still he did not search for her. I knew nothing of this at the time. I arrived for my

wedding and was married. If there was a shadow on my husband's heart, I never understood why it was there. Until the last year of his life. He told me the story. It was his greatest regret, he said. He had never recovered from the loss of his true love, or his cowardice in not seeking out his child."

"He may have acted wrongly," Qui-Gon said. "It is good that he recognized that before his own end. But I must ask you: What is its relevance to today, Queen Veda?" He asked the question, already knowing the answer.

"Elan is his daughter," Queen Veda answered quietly. "The past lives in the present always."

"And why have you told us this?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Because now I, too, am dying," the Queen answered. "Elan is my last secret. I want to do justice before I die, justice to Elan. She should know her birthright. She is the true heir to the throne, not Beju. She must have the Mark of the Crown on her," the Queen finished softly. Her gaze became unfocused again, as though she were back in the past.

"The Mark of the Crown?" Qui-Gon prompted.

"The mark of succession," Queen Veda explained. "It's not an actual mark on the body. Only the Council of Ministers can identify it."

"Prince Beju doesn't have it?" Qui-Gon asked.

"If what my husband said is true, he will not," the Queen replied. "It is not in the Council's best interests to test him. As you may imagine, most are not happy about the elections. Whoever becomes governor will have the right to open the Council to elections as well."

Qui-Gon nodded. The Council would naturally back Beju in order to retain their own power. "What would you like us to do?" he asked.

"I cannot contact Elan," the Queen said. "Obviously, she wouldn't meet with me. But if you could send a message to her and request a meeting... most do not refuse a Jedi request, you must admit. The hill people often jam communication to the

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outside. I could send someone with your message. Travel in the hill country is difficult and dangerous.” The Queen looked down at her clasped hands. “And there’s something else I haven’t told you. The Council didn’t want you to come. I had to negotiate with them. Under the terms of our agreement, you are forbidden to leave the city of Galu.”

“That makes things more complicated,” Qui-Gon observed neutrally.

“Yes, but not impossible,” Queen Veda said eagerly. “Perhaps you can—”

Suddenly, the ornate metal door to the chamber was thrown open with such force that it hit the wall with a loud clang. Prince Beju strode in, with a tall, bald man in a silver robe at his side.

The Prince pointed a finger at Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon.

“You must leave Gala at once!” he cried.

Chapter Three

The Queen rose to her feet. “Beju, explain yourself,” she ordered, her voice shimmering with anger.

Beju slowly circled around the Jedi, his gaze contemptuous. He was a solidly built young man the same approximate height and weight as Obi-Wan, but with shoulder-length hair that was so pale it was almost white. His eyes were the same ice-blue as his mother’s.

In his short encounter with the Prince, Obi-Wan had been granted a full picture of the boy’s arrogance. He kept his own gaze steady but neutral. Qui-Gon was right. They should not antagonize the Prince any further.

“They call themselves Jedi, but they are nothing but troublemakers,” Prince Beju spat out. “Have you heard about their doings on Phindar? They meddled and sowed discord. As a result, there was a great battle. Many were killed. Do you want that to happen on Gala, Mother?”

“They broke the back of a crime organization that had taken over the planet,” Queen Veda replied calmly. “The Phindians are free. And they also brought us bacta to help with our own shortage.”

The Prince flushed. “Some gift,” he said contemptuously. “It was I who went to Phindar to negotiate the release of the bacta.

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Thanks to the Jedi, the bacta was off-loaded from my ship by the Phindian rebels! No doubt the Jedi ordered them to do so. And now they bring my bacta here as a gift? It is a joke!”

Obi-Wan stiffened. Why didn’t Qui-Gon speak? The Prince was giving his own version of what happened on Phindar. It was filled with lies. Prince Beju knew that the Jedi had no proof that the Prince meant harm to Gala. Obi-Wan took note of his cleverness. But why wouldn’t Qui-Gon speak the truth to Queen Veda?

The frail, bald man by Beju’s side turned to the Jedi. “Do you have anything to say to this?”

“This is Lonnag Giba,” Queen Veda said, turning to the Jedi. “He is the Head of the Council of Ministers, and graciously agreed to your visit.”

“That was before I heard Prince Beju’s charges,” Giba said sternly. “I ask you again, Jedi. What do you have to say?”

“We differ with the Prince about what happened on Phindar,” Qui-Gon replied. His voice betrayed no irritation or anger at the Prince’s charges. “But it would be pointless to argue. We were invited here. Why should we defend ourselves? If you wish us to leave your world, we shall.”

“No!” Queen Veda exclaimed.

“Yes, Mother,” Prince Beju said, flicking his cape behind him as he turned to face her. “Let them go. They are nothing but meddlers masquerading as guardians, weaklings masquerading as Knights.”

Queen Veda sighed. “Enough, Beju,” she said. “You have made your point. But Qui-Gon Jinn is right. The Jedi were invited here as guardians of the peace. We want the elections to go smoothly, don’t we?”

“We don’t want them at all,” the Prince replied sullenly. “I am the true king of Gala. Father meant it to be so, and well you know it. If I ruled Gala, I would send these troublemakers on the first transport back to their so-holy Temple.”

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“Yet *I* am ruler now,” the Queen said softly. “And I say they shall stay.”

“Of course,” the Prince said bitterly. “You deny me the crown. Why not deny me everything else?”

“Perhaps there is a compromise we can reach,” Giba broke in smoothly. “The Jedi will remain on Gala. But they cannot leave the palace unescorted. We should send someone with them. Someone who knows the city well.” He turned to the Jedi. “It is for your protection as well. The city is a dangerous place right now. There is much unrest. You’ll need a guide.”

Giba spoke diplomatically, but Obi-Wan didn’t believe a word. The old man knew that Jedi didn’t need help to defend themselves. It was just a way to get them to accept a spy who would report on their movements.

Obi-Wan waited for Qui-Gon’s protest. But again, the Jedi Knight said nothing. How could he agree to such humiliating terms?

Queen Veda’s gaze rested on her son for a moment. She looked tired—very tired. “As you wish, Beju,” she said softly. “It is true. I cannot deny you everything.” She wrapped her hand around a glowing rod that hung on the wall. It changed color to a soft blue. “Jono Dunn will escort the Jedi.”

A moment later, the metal door opened. A boy about Obi-Wan’s age stood at attention, dressed in a navy tunic and pants.

“Jono Dunn, come forward,” the Queen said. “These are the Jedi sent to Gala to oversee elections. Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi. You will be their escort during their stay.”

“They are not allowed to leave the palace without you,” Prince Beju said quickly.

“Is this acceptable, Qui-Gon?” Queen Veda asked. Her eyes pleaded with him to agree.

Qui-Gon nodded. “We thank you for the assistance, Queen Veda,” he said quietly.

Obi-Wan couldn’t believe it. Not only was Qui-Gon accepting a guard, he was thanking the Queen!

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Qui-Gon's sharp blue gaze moved to Giba. "And thank you, Giba. I'm sure our guard will protect us on the dangerous streets of Galu."

Qui-Gon put a hand on Jono Dunn's shoulder and positioned the boy between himself and Obi-Wan. Large and powerful, Qui-Gon towered over the slight boy. Although he was the same age, Obi-Wan's size and strength dwarfed the boy's as well. Qui-Gon had effortlessly made the point that Giba's offer was hollow. Jono was no protection for the Jedi. He was only a pawn in the game.

The Queen's lips quirked in a smile. Giba's narrow face flushed red with anger. He pressed his thin lips together. "Enjoy your stay," he said through clenched teeth.

"I'm sure we shall," Qui-Gon responded.

Qui-Gon bowed and left the chamber. Obi-Wan followed only a second later. When he reached the hall, Qui-Gon was already gone.

Chapter Four

Legacy.

The word struck a chord in Qui-Gon. He needed time to consider why it had lodged so deep within him. He took the exterior stairway to the gardens below. Obi-Wan would no doubt make his way to their quarters.

Trees were bursting with fruit, or were in blossom within the palace walls. Qui-Gon recognized a few—muja and tango. Masses of white, red, purple, and yellow marked the flower gardens beyond. The palace was famous for its extensive gardens. Qui-Gon knew that every plant, tree, and flower native to Gala was represented here. He strolled in the orchards. The muja trees were in blossom, and every sudden breeze sent a shower of pink petals drifting to the grass below.

The Queen had spoken of her legacy. Dying, she considered what she wished to leave behind. Her first thought was for her son. She even felt a bond with a stepchild she had never known.

The Galacians were a people of strong family bonds. Jobs and land were often passed down from parent to child. Marriages were carefully chosen to strengthen the family.

Qui-Gon had given up family and children for the life of a Jedi. He had chosen freely. No Jedi was bound to the life. He could choose to leave it at any time. Yet he knew he would not.

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Qui-Gon leaned down to pick up petals from the grass. He let them drift through his fingers, to be carried by the wind. This would be his life, he thought. He would wander the galaxy. He would risk his life on behalf of strangers. What would he leave behind?

Qui-Gon's wandering took him to the kitchen gardens. Signs of planting surrounded him—shovels and rakes, careful rows of tiny seedlings taking root in the dirt. He looked down at the ground, almost surprised to see his own foot prints there. Wind and rain would soon wash them away.

Elan had chosen to live apart from society. She followed a set of laws that belonged to no government, no world, only her fellow travelers.

She was like him, he realized. He had never met her, but he knew her.

“Qui-Gon?”

He turned at the sound of Obi-Wan's voice. The boy looked hesitant, afraid to disturb him.

“You disappeared,” Obi-Wan said. “I didn't know where to look.”

Qui-Gon could not share his thoughts. Obi-Wan was young, just starting out on his journey as a Jedi. He would not understand thoughts of legacies, of what he would leave behind. Not yet.

“Why did you agree to our not leaving the palace without an escort?” The question seemed torn from Obi-Wan's lips. Obviously, the boy thought Qui-Gon should have resisted Giba's suggestion.

“It is better for now that they think they can control us,” Qui-Gon answered.

“Do you think the Queen is telling the truth?” Obi-Wan asked. “Does she really not want her son to win the election? And what does she want with Elan?”

“It could be as she says,” Qui-Gon said slowly. “Or it could be that she wants us to lure Elan back here in order to kill her.

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Any Council member who was alive when the King was young knows that Beju is not the true heir. I would guess that Giba knows, for example. That is why he is afraid of us. There is always the danger that the secret will be exposed. Of course, if the Queen is lying about her intentions, she could be in league with Giba and their disagreement was staged for our benefit. If they can get rid of Elan, Queen Veda could call off the elections and appoint Beju King.” Qui-Gon paused. “Or she could be lying about Elan for some other purpose we haven’t discovered.”

“Well, what do you believe?” Obi-Wan asked, trying to keep the confusion and impatience out of his voice.

“I think there are more secrets here,” Qui-Gon answered thoughtfully. “Yet I think we should proceed as though the Queen is telling the truth. I am going to the hill country to find Elan.”

“But our mission is to oversee the election!” Obi-Wan protested. “You can’t do that from the hill country.”

One corner of Qui-Gon’s mouth shifted in a half smile. “You are sometimes a bit too fond of the rules, Obi-Wan. Things change. A mission is not clear-cut. Sometimes the direct road is not the one to take.”

“But the safety of Gala is in our hands,” Obi-Wan argued. “We were sent to be guardians of peace, not to go chasing long-lost daughters.”

“You may disagree with me, Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon said mildly. “That is your right. But I will go.”

“We’re not allowed to leave the city, or even the palace without an escort,” Obi-Wan reminded him. “You were the one to agree to it! Giba and Prince Beju will be furious. Can’t we allow the Queen’s messenger to contact Elan?”

“Elan will not listen to a message,” Qui-Gon replied. “She will have to be persuaded. She will have to see the truth in my eyes, or she will not come.”

“You talk as if you know her!” Obi-Wan exclaimed.

“I do,” Qui-Gon said quietly.

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He walked closer to Obi-Wan and rested his hand gently on his shoulder for a moment. “Don’t worry, Padawan. You can handle the mission here until I return. Be alert for palace intrigue.” Qui-Gon’s keen gaze swept the palace. “Trust no one here. There is a disturbance in the Force. I don’t know where exactly it lies.”

Obi-Wan looked at him, frustrated. “But what will I tell them when they ask where you are?”

Instead of answering, Qui-Gon strode through the half-planted gardens back to the trees. As he walked, he reached up and wiped a piece of ripe fruit from a branch overhead. Without turning, he tossed it over his shoulder. He didn’t have to turn. He knew his Padawan would catch it.

“It’s simple,” he called behind him. “Tell them I’m still here.”

Chapter Five

“Respect is the cornerstone of the Master-Padawan bond,” Obi-Wan said through his teeth. His voice bounced off the walls of his room, sounding hollow to his ears. Still, he needed the reminder. Every day, alone in the palace, he questioned Qui-Gon’s decision.

The morning sun burnished the wood of the vast bed he slept in. A tapestry hung on the opposite wall, finely worked with metallic threads of gold, silver, and green. Woven blankets in rich, jewel-like colors kept out the night chill. It was the finest room he’d ever slept in. But staying in the palace for the past two days was no treat.

Qui-Gon had given him an impossible task. Each morning before dawn, Obi-Wan ran through the connecting door to Qui-Gon’s quarters and disarranged the blankets on Qui-Gon’s bed. He lay on his pillow to leave an indentation. Each morning Jono Dunn knocked on the door, bringing tea and fruit. Obi-Wan had told Jono that Qui-Gon meditated in the gardens early. He would wait for Jono to leave, then drink Qui-Gon’s tea and eat his fruit as well as his own. That part was not hard. Obi-Wan was always hungry.

As for Prince Beju and Giba, Obi-Wan had to constantly invent excuses for Qui-Gon’s absence. The Jedi was resting, or

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meditating, or touring the gardens. He would be along any minute, if they'd care to wait... they never did. He would take his evening meal in his room. He had already retired for the night...

Perhaps they were suspicious. Obi-Wan couldn't tell. He had a feeling they were relieved that Qui-Gon wasn't more involved in the elections. Obi-Wan told Jono that Qui-Gon left much of the monitoring to him.

A soft knock came at Obi-Wan's door. A moment later, Jono opened it.

"I left a tray for Qui-Gon, as usual," Jono said. He placed Obi-Wan's tray on the small table by the window. Usually, he bowed and left quickly, but today, he lingered.

"I did not see him in the gardens," he said. "It's my job to pick the flowers for the Queen morning and night. Yet I never see the Jedi."

Obi-Wan reached for a piece of blumfruit. "The gardens are so large. He most likely avoided you. He doesn't like to be interrupted during his morning meditation."

Jono stood quietly. He was a handsome boy, with golden hair and the glowing skin of the Galacians. Although he had accompanied Obi-Wan on several trips to inspect polling places in Galu, he had not talked much.

"You think I am a spy," he burst out suddenly. "You think I am working for the Prince."

"Well, aren't you?" Obi-Wan asked calmly.

"I do not report to the Prince," Jono said scornfully. "I serve the Queen. The Dunns have served the ruler of Gala since the Tallah dynasty began."

"So you come from a line of royal servants?" Obi-Wan asked curiously. He pushed the plate of food toward Jono.

Jono ignored it. He raised his chin proudly. "The Dunns are great landowners far from Galu. I was chosen at the age of five to come to the palace. It was a great honor. All children in the Dunn family line are watched from an early age. Only the smartest and quickest are chosen."

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Obi-Wan held out a piece of fruit toward Jono. "I, too, was chosen at an early age," he told the boy. "I left my family and went to the Jedi Temple. It was a great honor. But I missed my family very much, even though I couldn't really remember them."

Jono reached out a tentative hand and took the fruit from Obi-Wan. "The beginning was the hardest," he said, popping it into his mouth.

"The Jedi Temple is calm and beautiful. It is my home, and yet it is not a *home*, like everyone else has."

"That's just the way I feel!" Jono agreed, sitting on the edge of the bed next to Obi-Wan. "The palace was too grand at first. And I missed the smell of the sea. But now I feel at home. I know my duty, and I am proud to do it. There is honor in serving my Queen." He met Obi-Wan's gaze steadily. "But I do not spy."

At that moment, Obi-Wan and Jono became friends. Jono continued to accompany him on his walks through Galu, but instead of silently staying a short pace behind him, Jono walked beside Obi-Wan, sharing stories of the city and of Deca Brun, his hero.

"The Queen is right to call for elections," Jono told him. "Deca Brun will help Gala to rise again. He is for all the people, not just rich people."

Jono never asked again about Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan knew Jono suspected that Qui-Gon had left the palace. He appreciated his guide's silence. He did not have to lie to Jono any longer. His friend asked no questions.

Jono often spoke of his family. Even though he rarely saw them, his connection to them was strong. Obi-Wan came to envy Jono's deep commitment. He had left behind a concept of family when he took up his destiny as a Jedi. His allegiance was to the Jedi Code. Was this choice the right one? Suddenly the Jedi Code seemed so much more abstract than the ties of blood.

Jude Watson

Heritage. Legacies. He wished he could speak of what he was feeling to Qui-Gon. But his Master wouldn't understand. He was deeply committed to the Jedi Code. He did not look back and wonder what he was missing.

And besides, he had abandoned Obi-Wan in order to chase a ghost.

Evenings were long in Gala. The sun set early, and the three moons rose slowly in the navy sky. Obi-Wan liked to walk in the orchard at that hour, when the pale gleam of moonlight turned the fruit on the trees to silver.

One evening he was surprised to find Queen Veda sitting on the grass, her back against the thick, multi-stemmed trunk of a muja tree. She wasn't wearing her headdress, and her pale gold hair spilled down to her waist. She looked like a young girl until Obi-Wan drew closer and saw the wasting of illness on her face.

"Sit down, young Obi-Wan," she said, gesturing next to her. "I, too, like the orchard at this time."

Obi-Wan sat next to her, cross-legged and erect in Jedi fashion. He had not seen the Queen since he'd arrived. She looked shockingly worse.

"I like the smell of the grass," Queen Veda murmured, running her hands through it. "Before I was sick, I used to like to look at it from my window. I looked at everything from a window. Now I find I must touch it and smell it and be part of it." She placed a bit of grass in Obi-Wan's palm and closed his fingers over it. "Hold on to life, Obi-Wan. That is my only piece of advice to you."

Obi-Wan saw the marks of tears on the Queen's face. He wished Qui-Gon were here. His Master's calm compassion soothed even the most fevered hearts. What would Qui-Gon say?

He would start with something neutral, but sympathetic. He would let the Queen speak, knowing she needed a willing space to talk.

"You are not feeling better," he said carefully.

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"No, I am feeling worse," Queen Veda said, resting her head against the trunk. "The pain is very bad at night. I can't sleep. By the middle of the day I feel somewhat better, but at night it begins again. That's why I come out here, before the pain gets bad. I want to remember days I felt well. Days in the country..." The Queen sighed.

"In the country?" Obi-Wan prompted.

"The Tallahs have a country estate west of here," Queen Veda said. "Just after I had fallen ill I went there to recuperate. Maybe it was the fresh air. Or maybe," she said ruefully, "it was being able to rest. No Council of Ministers calling me to meetings. No servants to buzz around me. Just the caretaker and myself. But then it seemed the government could not run without me, so they came to me. Within days, I felt worse than ever. That was the worst thing," she said sadly. "To feel that I was getting better, and then to relapse."

"But why don't you return?" Obi-Wan asked.

"The elections consumed my time at first," the Queen said. "Now I am too weak to travel. So my doctors tell me. And they are the best in Galu. Every day has been the same for me. Hope that I am recovering. Then despair. Now hope is gone. I'm just waiting."

Obi-Wan looked at her. The moons had risen higher, painting her pale face with a silvery cast. He saw again that she had once been beautiful.

"Don't look so sad," she told him. "I've accepted it at last. Now, will you help me rise? It's time for my tea."

Obi-Wan rose and held out his hand. Her grip was weak. He placed another hand under her elbow and helped her stand.

"Good night, Queen Veda," he told her as she moved off, her gown a whisper in the grass. "I'm sorry," he added softly, knowing she would not hear.

The Queen's words had moved him. Whether she was lying about wanting Elan to have her birthright, he didn't know. But he knew the Queen had spoken honestly about her illness and

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her fears. He could only imagine how terrible it must be to feel as though you are slowly losing your grip on life. To suffer, to feel better, and then to have that hope of life snatched away every evening as the moons rose....

Every evening. Obi-Wan sat up straighten The Force was telling him to focus. Wasn't there an odd rhythm to the Queen's illness? And hadn't she said she had felt better at her country estate?

Until the Council members arrived...

The thought made Obi-Wan dizzy.

Was the Queen being poisoned?

Chapter Six

Obi-Wan didn't hesitate. If his suspicions were true, there was no time to lose. Quickly, he rose to his feet and hurried through the gardens. He spied an old man dressed in the silver robes of a council member strolling through the trees, placing an occasional hand on the silver bark for support. His milky blue eyes were turned upward toward the moon. Obi-Wan doubled back before he was seen. He did not want to attract any attention.

He sped noiselessly through the palace hallways to the Queen's chambers. He knocked softly on the door.

"It's Obi-Wan," he called.

Jono opened the door. "The Queen is taking her nightly refreshment," he said.

"Who brings it?" Obi-Wan asked. When Jono looked puzzled, he added quickly, "I was wondering if I could get some tea and something to eat at night."

"The kitchen servants bring it up," Jono answered. "I'll ask them to include you." He grinned. "I'll make sure you get the cook's best sweets."

"May I see the Queen?" Obi-Wan asked. "I just need a word or two."

Jono nodded and withdrew to an inner chamber. After a moment, the door opened, and he beckoned Obi-Wan in.

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The Queen was reclining on a sleep-couch, a tray with a teacup and a plate of fruit and sweets next to her on a small table. A small bouquet of flowers stood next to it.

"I wanted to make sure you were all right," Obi-Wan said, coming closer. "You seemed tired in the orchard."

"How kind of you." The Queen gave him a sad smile. "I'm a bit more tired than usual, I'm afraid. But don't worry about me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You have more important matters to attend to."

"I think not," he said gently. "Your well-being is very important to me, Queen Veda."

He reached down and felt the teacup. There was only a small amount left. "Your tea is cold. Can I fetch you another?"

The Queen's eyes fluttered closed. "I've had enough," she said weakly. "You can tell Jono to take it away."

"You rest now," Obi-Wan said gently. He picked up the tray and moved to the doorway. When he slipped through, the outer chamber was empty. Good. He did not want to involve Jono in his plans.

Quickly, he carried the tray to his room. There, he poured the tea into an empty vial from his emergency medpac. He placed the vial and the rest of the sweets in a drawstring bag and slipped them into a pocket of his tunic. Then he brought the tray back down to the kitchens.

Tomorrow, he would have to find a substance analyzer. And he would have to do it without involving Jono.

"I'm worried about my Queen," Jono told Obi-Wan the next day as they walked down the streets of Galu. "I watch her grow weaker by the day. There is nothing the doctors can do. Nothing I can do."

"You are close to her," Obi-Wan observed. He had seen the affectionate way the Queen spoke to Jono. He certainly got more warmth from the Queen than Obi-Wan did from Qui-Gon. But then, Jono had served her now for eight years.

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Jono bit his lip. He nodded. "It is so hard. Prince Beju doesn't come to see her. He's angry at her. And he says it upsets him to see her look so ill. He needs to focus on the election. How can a son be so cruel? He thinks only of his own feelings!"

They stopped outside a polling area that had been set up in a community hall. Obi-Wan had toured many of the polling areas in Galu. He spoke to those who would direct the voters to the private datapad terminals to cast their votes. He tested the datapads for accuracy. But he felt as though his visits were useless. He was not an expert on voting processes.

On his first outing, he had contacted Qui-Gon by comlink to tell him how useless he felt. Qui-Gon had no sympathy.

"Your presence is enough," he said shortly. "Just let them see that the process is being monitored from an outside source. That will give the people trust in the system."

Obi-Wan turned to Jono. "Jono, would you mind waiting outside? I think it would be better. After all, people know you're a palace worker. I have to look neutral or they won't trust the voting."

"That's true," Jono said hesitantly. "But I am supposed to stay at your side...." His voice trailed off, but he smiled. "Of course you're right, Obi-Wan. I wouldn't want to jeopardize the elections. I'll wait over there in the plaza."

Obi-Wan thanked him and walked into the community center. He felt guilty deceiving Jono this way. But he couldn't involve his friend in his task. If the Queen was being poisoned, no one at the palace could find out that he knew. He had to trap the poisoner. If he needed Jono's help later, he would ask for it. First, he would need to consult Qui-Gon.

Obi-Wan headed through the community center and out a side door. He quickly walked down an alley into a side street. Then he doubled back in the opposite direction. On the way to the center, Obi-Wan had kept his eye out for info-data booths. They were dotted around Galu, and citizens used them to look

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up information on services available in the capital. There was one only a few blocks from the center.

The bright green light on top of the info-data booth glowed, telling him the booth was free. Quickly, Obi-Wan entered. He typed “substance analyzer” into the datapad. Within seconds, the screen flashed with several names. Obi-Wan accessed a city map, which pinpointed where each analyzer was located. One name, Mali Errat, had a lab close to Obi-Wan’s location. He touched the screen, and a luminous green path showed him the route.

Obi-Wan hurried through the crowded streets. Jono would soon start to wonder why he was taking so long. The boy knew the streets of Galu well, and might search for him.

There was no answer to his knock at the address, and no sign outside. Obi-Wan pushed open the door cautiously and found himself in a tiny, cluttered room. One long durasteel table ran across the middle of it, touching the walls at both ends. The table was covered with equipment: tubes, vials, datapads, circuits, measuring devices, holofiles. Metal storage boxes crowded the floor, some stacked precariously, almost as high as the ceiling. Durasheets covered with data unfurled across the floor.

Was this a lab, or a storage area for a lunatic?

“Hello?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Who’s that?” A head popped up from behind a stack of storage boxes. It was a Galacian elder. Wisps of platinum hair covered his bald head, and his pale green eyes squinted at Obi-Wan. “What is it? Come on, then,” he said impatiently, snapping his fingers. “State your business.”

Obi-Wan walked closer and peered around the boxes. The man was sitting on the floor. Data printouts were littered around him and coiled in his lap. “I’m looking for Mali Errat—”

“Speak up, boy, don’t whisper!”

“Mali Errat,” Obi-Wan repeated, louder this time.

“Don’t shout! I’m Mali. You look surprised to find me in my own lab, boy. Well, what do you want?”

“I have something I need analyzed—” Obi-Wan started.

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Mali interrupted him again. "Another surprise. You're in a substance analysis lab. Therefore I would assume you have something to be analyzed. Obviously, I am brighter than I look." The old man chortled.

Obi-Wan looked at the cluttered lab, the rolls of data printout that coiled on the floor like snakes. "Maybe you're too busy-"

"Way too busy, it's true," Mali snapped. "So don't waste my time. Show me your item."

He didn't really have a choice. There was no time to find a more conventional scientist. Or a more polite one. Obi-Wan withdrew the pouch from his tunic. He handed it to Mali.

Mali took out the vial of tea and the little round sweet cakes. "You want me to analyze your lunch?"

Obi-Wan held out his hand. "I can go elsewhere."

"Touchy young man," Mali muttered. "When do you need results?"

"Right now," Obi-Wan said.

"It will cost you," Mali warned.

"I have credits," Obi-Wan said, showing him.

Mali took several credits from his hand. "That will do. Now." He stood. He was a small man, but still agile, Obi-Wan noted as Mali leaped over a storage box and pulled a stool up to the durasteel table.

Whistling through his teeth, Mali first took some crumbs from the cakes and inserted them into a scan grid.

"Cake," he pronounced after a moment, reading the data. "Sweetener, muja, meal, coagulate..."

"Nothing else?" Obi-Wan asked.

Mali licked the residue off his fingers. "It's delicious." He popped the rest into his mouth.

Obi-Wan sighed. "Try the liquid."

Mali poured a drop from the vial into a scan grid. Seconds later, the grid flashed a graph with numbers and symbols.

"Ah," Mali murmured, straightening. "Fascinating."

"What is it?" Obi-Wan asked, leaning forward.

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“Tea,” Mali said.

“And?” Obi-Wan prompted.

“Water” Mali answered.

“And?” Obi-Wan asked.

Mali squinted at him. “Young impatient man, you must tell me what I am looking for. There are herbal compounds here, some acids, some tannins. But nothing I can tell is out of the ordinary. Unless you tell me what out of the ordinary event you are suspecting.”

“Poison,” Obi-Wan said reluctantly.

“Well, there you are! Always better to say what you want at the outset. Otherwise, we waste time. No poison in the cake. A good thing, eh? I ate it!” Humming, Mali stared at the graph again. He pressed a few keys on the analyzer. Another graph appeared, then a stream of numbers and symbols.

“Well?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Interesting,” Mali said. “There is one substance that’s not identifiable.”

“Is that unusual?” Obi-Wan asked.

He shrugged. “Yes, but not too. It’s just a matter of searching other data fields for chemical compounds with the same structure. But that takes time.”

“I don’t have time,” Obi-Wan said grimly.

Mali looked at the vial. He let out a whistle through his teeth. “Ah. I see your point. I still have to search, impatient young man. But for another credit, I will search fast.”

Obi-Wan handed him the credit. He started for the door, then turned. “Can’t you tell me if it *could* be poison?” he asked. “Just your educated guess.”

“It’s possible,” Mali admitted. “I can tell you this, young man. Whatever it is, it doesn’t belong in tea.”

Before finding Jono, Obi-Wan found a secluded back alley to use his comlink to contact Qui-Gon. He didn’t want to risk using the comlink in public. And he felt safer contacting Qui-Gon

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outside of the palace walls. He waited for long minutes. But Qui-Gon did not respond. He was out of reach.

Obi-Wan was on his own.

He trudged back to the community center. Jono was sitting on top of the wall that circled the plaza. His eyes were closed, his face tilted to catch the warming rays of the sun. The sun shines for such a short time during the Galacian day that Galacians take any opportunity to sunbathe.

“Sorry to take so long,” Obi-Wan told Jono. “There were a few problems. Nothing major.”

Jono jumped down from his perch. “I knew you would return. It’s all right. I am used to waiting. I have waited for a friend for a long time, Obi-Wan.”

Chapter Seven

The Queen had not exaggerated the difficult journey to find the hill people. At first, the roads had been clearly marked. Qui-Gon had found a ride in a speeder to the outskirts of the city. A kind farmer had taken him far on a turbo cart, a young teenager on his speeder bike. But as the roads grew worse and the landscape more desolate, there were no more rides to be had.

The hills rose before him on the third day. They were rugged and steep, climbing through dense forests. Occasionally he would come to a clearing and be met with the eerie sight of a group of large standing stones. The harsh beauty of the land grew as he traveled higher. The short days ended in sunsets that turned the sky to blazing colors. Then the three moons rose, casting a silvery glow over the pate rocks and twisted trees.

His comlink no longer worked. Qui-Gon hoped that Obi-Wan would not get into trouble back at the palace. He was anxious to find Elan, anxious to get back to Galu.

He reached the summit of the first range of hills. Snow dotted the peaks. The only way through was a series of narrow passes. Qui-Gon felt exposed and vulnerable as he hiked through the narrow gorge.

As he traveled, the sky darkened. The temperature dropped, and he unpacked his thermal cape from his survival pack. He

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could smell snow in the air. A storm was heading this way. He would have to find shelter soon.

Perhaps it was because his eyes were constantly moving, searching for shelter. Perhaps it was because the eerie silence pressed on him, the dark sky like a lowering curtain. Because Qui-Gon might not have caught the flicker of movement to his left if every sense hadn't been on alert. It could have been no more than a shadow flickering on a rock, or the stir of a leaf. But the movement had caught his eye and prepared him just a few quick seconds before the attack came.

The bandits zoomed down on landspeeders with mounted ion cannons on front and rear. Qui-Gon tossed his survival pack on the ground. He activated his lightsaber just in time to meet the first speeder. He dodged at the last possible second, sending the speeder careening into a tree. He was already turning to his left to slash at the driver of the second speeder. His blow connected, and the speeder lurched to the left, the driver hanging on as it barely missed the canyon wall. He righted it at the last second and zoomed back up to come around from the right.

Qui-Gon dove for cover. He could use the fact that he was in such a narrow space. They would have to come at him one at a time. While the speeders maneuvered to come at him again, he found a boulder close to a grouping of massive standing stones. The canyon was to his back, the stones to his left. The bandits could only approach from the right.

There were ten speeders... no, twelve—two more buzzed down from the sky. One came at him, ion cannons blasting. Chips of stone flew at him as he ducked and rolled, and stood again as the speeder zoomed past him. Qui-Gon used the momentum of his roll to slash at the driver from behind. He fell off the speeder, which zoomed out of control and crashed. The driver lay on the ground, unable to rise.

The second speeder was down, and the next one was right on its heels, cannons firing. This driver was more skilled than the others. He zigzagged from side to side, the cannon fire missing

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Qui-Gon by centimeters as he took cover from standing stone to standing stone. He reached out for the Force. He needed it. He felt it pulse around him, grow stronger. He drew it in.

He moved quickly, surprising the driver. He flattened himself on the ground as the driver overshot him, cannons shooting at the canyon wall now. He counted off seconds as the driver made a sharp turn to come back at him again. Qui-Gon left the cover of the stones and stood, lightsaber held high. This time, he aimed at the speeder's control panel. He struck a hard blow that he felt all the way up to his shoulder. The pain shot up his arm. The blow had cost him, but it disabled the speeder. The engine began to smoke, and the speeder tilted wildly. It hit the speeder bearing down on Qui-Gon. They both crashed to the canyon floor.

Then Qui-Gon saw the speeder off to his left. The driver was either reckless or skilled—it remained to be seen. He was coming fast, straight at the standing stones. The gap between them was small, barely enough for a speeder to fit through. They were spaced at irregular intervals, making it almost impossible to navigate between them.

Almost *is the key word*, Qui-Gon realized too late.

The daring driver made a hard left, turning the speeder sideways. It zoomed through the small opening. He reversed, hovered in midair, then made a sharp turn to the right. He zoomed through the next opening, barely clearing it. Now he had a split second to make a clear shot at Qui-Gon.

The Force helped Qui-Gon move, sending him leaping up on top of the boulder he had first used for cover. Another speeder was already bearing down on him. The driver was surprised by the sudden move, and made a hard turn to avoid Qui-Gon, even as his cannon boomed. At the same time, the driver midway through the standing stones fired his cannons. The two blasts collided in midair, sending an explosive charge that ricocheted off the boulder. The impact turned the boulder into a bomb, shattering it into large pieces of shrapnel that seemed to fly at Qui-Gon in slow motion.

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Qui-Gon was hit in the chest. Badly. The impact knocked him backward, his lightsaber leaving his grip and flying meters away from him. He lay on his back, stunned. He could hear the engines of the speeders roaring as the two vehicles maneuvered to take their next shot. His mind whirled from his fall. He groped for his lightsaber. He knew one thing: He was caught between the two blasting cannons, out in the open. He called on the Force and summoned his lightsaber to his hand.

The higher whine of a new engine came to his ears. As his lightsaber flew to his grip, Qui-Gon saw another vehicle zoom into the tight spaces among the standing stones. He recognized it as a swoop, a speeder bike with a powerful engine. The controls were located on the handlebars and on the saddle. Only the most daring riders could master such a vehicle. Just a slight touch could send it careening out of control.

He'd thought the first bandit was daring. The swoop driver bordered on reckless. But Qui-Gon read confidence and control in the way the vehicle moved, so fast it was almost a blur, banking right and left, hovering in midair and then reversing, zooming high and low to maneuver underneath the larger speeder.

Qui-Gon pushed himself to his feet. The pain hit him, red and searing, and he realized he'd been hit by a chunk of boulder in the leg as well. He called on the Force to help his body to respond, his mind to clear. The speeder was bearing down on him again. He leaped to avoid cannon fire and somersaulted over the low-flying speeder, striking down as he did so at the control panel. He heard the engine sputter and die, and the speeder crashed.

Qui-Gon hit the ground and dodged blaster fire from a pilot hurrying to help his comrade in the standing stones. But this driver was not so adept. He attempted to turn into the small gap and missed, hitting the stone and sending his craft wobbling as he struggled to right it.

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Qui-Gon got a good look at the driver of the swoop. He wore a black cloth headdress that wrapped around his face. Only his eyes were visible. His gloved hands gripped the handlebars of the swoop as he expertly twisted and turned through the stones, running the speeder down relentlessly. Yet Qui-Gon could tell that the swoop driver was careful to allow the speeder enough maneuverability so that it wouldn't crash amid the stones.

Qui-Gon wondered what would happen to him once the swoop driver took care of the bandit on the speeder. The driver was surely a bandit, too. Qui-Gon would probably have his hands full again.

The remaining speeders hovered, reluctant to help their comrade in the maze of standing stones, distracted from Qui-Gon for the moment. Qui-Gon stood, his lightsaber activated and at his side. He was ready.

At last the speeder made it through the standing stones, the swoop now so close that it was almost touching the speeder's tailpipe. Suddenly, the swoop turned and flanked the speeder, driving it toward Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon was surprised by the maneuver but not unprepared. He leaped aside as ion cannons began to fire. He could feel that his leg wound made him clumsy. He stumbled slightly, then twisted to keep the speeder in view.

The driver of the swoop kept one hand on the controls and picked up a bowcaster with the other. Effortlessly keeping the swoop on track flanking the speeder, he aimed and shot at the driver. The laser hit the driver in the wrist. Qui-Gon saw his mouth open in a howl that turned into a snarl.

The distraction was all he needed. Qui-Gon summoned the Force. He needed one last burst. The Force propelled him in a flying leap to the top of one of the standing stones. He delivered a stunning blow to the surprised speeder driver as he zoomed past. The speeder crashed into the canyon floor.

Qui-Gon leaped down from the exposed position. He heard the high whine of other swoops. He looked up and saw them like black insects against the gray sky, heading straight for him. There

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were at least twenty, and more were heading down the pass from the opposite direction. He would not be able to fight so many. Qui-Gon watched as the speeder bandits took off. Some of the swoops gave chase. Had he landed in the middle of a bandit war?

The lead swoop flew toward him. Its repulsorlift engines kept it airborne a few inches off the ground as the driver leaped off, his bow-caster pointed straight at Qui-Gon. There was no use fighting. Qui-Gon deactivated his lightsaber and waited.

“Who are you?” The voice was gruff. Qui-Gon was surprised at how young the bandit sounded.

“Qui-Gon Jinn. I am a Jedi Knight sent to contact someone.”

The bowcaster was now pointed at his heart. “Who?” the bandit demanded.

Qui-Gon decided that it would do no harm to let the bandits know his mission. Perhaps they could be bargained with. “The leader of the hill people,” he said. “Elan.”

Slowly, the bandit unraveled the black headdress. A shower of silvery hair spilled over slender shoulders. A young woman stood before him. Her eyes were dark, the color of an evening sky, unusual for a Galacian. Her impatient gaze flicked over him, taking in everything about him and making it clear she was not impressed a bit.

“Well, at least you did something right,” she said. “You’ve found me.”

Chapter Eight

Elan tossed the headdress and bowcaster into the side compartment of her swoop. She dusted off her hands on her trousers. "The standing stones are sacred to the hill people," she told Qui-Gon. "You almost destroyed them."

"I did not mean to."

"You chose the field of battle," Elan said crisply.

"I needed cover," Qui-Gon said.

Snowflakes began to twinkle down from the sky. Elan cocked an eyebrow at him. "Ever hear of boulders? Trees?"

Qui-Gon resisted the temptation to argue. She was deliberately putting him on the defensive. "Do you know the attackers?" he asked instead.

She shrugged. "Bandits from the city outskirts. They make raids up here occasionally. There are always rumors in Galu that the hill people hoard gold. The greedy fools think it's true. I wish they'd leave us alone. We don't bother them." She gazed at him stonily. "Who sent you to find me, and why?"

"Queen Veda sent me," Qui-Gon said.

She waved a dismissive hand. "Then go back to Galu. I don't recognize her authority."

"Don't you want to know what she wants?"

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Elan crossed to the swoop and swung a leg over the saddle. “Something about the election, I’m sure. It’s no concern of mine.” She pointed back the way Qui-Gon had come. “The way back is that way. Don’t stay in the hills. You’ll be sorry if you do.”

He didn’t know if she was threatening him, or warning him against other bandit attacks. Another swoop flew toward them and stopped, hovering in the air. A tall young man with bluish skin gave Qui-Gon a quick glance, then turned to Elan. “Bad storm coming.”

“I know, Dana,” Elan said, casting a worried eye at the sky. “When they come in, they come in hard.”

As if to illustrate her words, the snowfall suddenly began. The flakes were like hard crystals, peppering Qui-Gon’s exposed skin. He leaned over to retrieve the survival pack he’d dropped when the fight began. The pain cut him to the quick, and he let out an involuntary hiss.

“He’s wounded,” Dana said.

Elan frowned, annoyed. “I can’t send you back, I suppose. Wounded, with this storm. You’d never survive. And night falls quickly in the mountains.”

Qui-Gon waited. His wounds hurt him. But they would heal. Now it appeared that he was lucky to have them. Elan’s conscience wouldn’t allow her to send him on alone.

“One night,” she warned him. “That’s all. Now climb up behind me. And don’t fall off. I don’t want to have to rescue you again.”

The hill people weren’t overly friendly, but they were kind. Their encampment was made up of white domes of various sizes constructed out of a flexible material that was bolted to struts. Inside his small dome, Qui-Gon found every comfort and convenience—thick carpets and quilts, a glowing heater, a small kitchen and bath, even a datapad for his personal use.

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Dana told him that a healer would come to dress his wounds. Qui-Gon did the best he could himself, but he could not reach the gash he'd received on his back when he fell. He slipped out of his tunic and waited for the healer to arrive. Even though the storm howled outside, the dome felt solid and warm.

There was a knock on the dome door, and he called out for the person to enter. Elan ducked through the doorway, carrying a small bag. She shut it quickly behind her to keep out the wind and snow. "Good, you're ready," she said.

"You're the healer?" Qui-Gon asked, surprised.

She nodded as she set out vials of ointment and rolls of bandages. When she looked at him, her blunt gaze was challenging. "Surprised? I'm not the healing type, is that it?"

"No, that's not it," Qui-Gon answered. "I have just never known a healer who could pilot a swoop like that."

A reluctant grin tugged at her mouth. "All right, let's see what we have here." She inspected his wounds and dabbed more ointment on one, then dressed it. "You did a good job."

"Jedi are trained as healers, too," Qui-Gon said. "I can't reach the one on my back."

"Turn around."

Qui-Gon felt the coolness as she dabbed salve on his wound. The salve soothed the burning. "Thank you for such comfortable quarters," he said.

"We do not live like barbarians, no matter what the city people think," Elan answered. She unrolled a bandage.

"I didn't think you did," Qui-Gon said. "And it has been my experience on many worlds that ignorance breeds fear. The fearful make up stories about what they fear."

"Yes," Elan said coolly. "The city people are ignorant and fearful. I agree. So why would I want to live among them?"

Qui-Gon tried to curb his exasperation. Talking with Elan was like trying to catch a drifting snowflake. Whatever he said, she found a way to make his meaning disappear.

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“So that is why you won’t participate in the elections?” Qui-Gon asked. “The support of the hill people could make a difference to the right candidate.”

“And who is the right candidate?” Elan asked. She still worked on the bandage on his back, so he couldn’t see her face. He could only feel her cool, expert fingers and occasionally the brush of her hair against his skin. “Deca Brun, who shouts slogans and murmurs promises? Wila Prammi, who has been a slave to the royal system and now talks of democracy? That young fool, Prince Beju? No thank you, Jedi. I don’t trust the elections, I don’t trust the Queen, and I don’t trust the candidates. I am happy where I am.” She patted the bandage in place, then rose. “I’m finished.”

Qui-Gon turned to face her. “Thank you. You feel no loyalty to Gala?”

She replaced the vials and bandages in her bag with quick motions. “I feel loyalty to my own people. I can trust them.”

“What about your world?” Qui-Gon asked, easing back into his tunic. “Gala is about to undergo a great change. A good change. Shouldn’t the hill people be part of it?”

Elan picked up her bag. She turned to him impatiently. “Is that why the Queen sent you? To ask for my support for her son?”

“No,” Qui-Gon said quietly. He watched her face carefully. “She sent me to tell you that Prince Beju is not King Cana’s true heir.”

“And why should she tell me this?” Elan demanded. “And why should I care?”

“Because you are the heir,” Qui-Gon said. “You are King Cana’s daughter.”

Elan blinked. He saw the shock on her face, and saw how she was trying to control it.

“What lies are these?” she asked, taking a step backward. “Why did you come here?”

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“Lies or truth, perhaps only you can discover,” Qui-Gon said. “I only say what has been told to me, and what I’ve come to believe. Queen Veda recently discovered that King Cana had a child before he married her. That child is you. The Queen says she wants you to know your birthright.”

“This is a trick,” Elan said flatly. “A trick to lure me back to the city. She wants to imprison me, scatter the hill people—”

“No,” Qui-Gon interrupted firmly. “I believe she only wants you to know. That is all.”

Elan whirled around, her pale silver hair flying. She stalked toward the door. “I won’t listen to this.”

“What about your parents?” Qui-Gon asked, raising his voice to be heard above the howling wind. “Your mother?”

Elan turned to face him again. “It is none of your business, Jedi. But I’ll tell you so that you will not try to confuse me with lies again. My mother lived in the hills all her life. She never went to Galu. My father was a great healer, renowned by all the hill people. You are wrong.”

“I am sure that those who raised you are worthy people,” Qui-Gon said. “But Cana’s blood may be in you, Elan.”

She stared at him icily. “Perhaps you actually believe the Queen’s lies. But Qui-Gon, I tell you that there is a plan behind her words. It is up to you to find it out.”

“She is dying,” Qui-Gon said quietly. “She is thinking of her legacy. It is a gift she gives to you.”

“I don’t believe it, and I don’t want it,” Elan answered firmly. “This is my legacy.” She gestured to take in the dome and all that was outside it. “These are my people. We are all outcasts. You’ve seen how Gala is ruled by powerful families. The hill people began a hundred years ago when those who were different—whose eyes were too dark, whose skin was too dark, who had no family—took refuge here. We made our own society, and freedom is our first rule. My parents gave me this heritage. I am proud of it. I don’t want any crown.”

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“You make a large decision in a very short time,” Qui-Gon observed.

Her dark eyes studied him. “And what is this to you, Qui-Gon Jinn?” she asked softly. “You have come a long way, almost lost your life, just to tell me this. But Gala is not your world. Its people are not your people. I have ties to something. Do you? Why should I listen to talk of legacies from someone who has no ties?”

Qui-Gon fell silent. Elan was trying to wound him. Some of what she said merely echoed his own thoughts.

“My comlink was not working earlier,” Qui-Gon said. “Is there any way I can contact my apprentice in Galu?”

“We jam communications in the hills for our protection,” Elan answered. “But we will let you contact him as soon as the storm lessens. Speak to Dana.”

She opened the door. The fierce wind blew back her hair and clothes and sent an icy draft toward Qui-Gon. Elan didn’t flinch.

“Tell your apprentice that when the weather clears, you will be on your way,” she added. Then she ducked out into the storm.

The door banged shut behind her. He had come a long way for nothing. His mission had failed.

Chapter Nine

Obi-Wan's comlink was activated when he woke the next day. Qui-Gon had contacted him at last. Afraid to use it in his room—he was still wary of surveillance—he took it to a corner of the gardens that was planted with wild tropical species. Under cover of the thick leaves of overhanging trees, he opened the communication line.

“Hello, Obi-Wan.” Qui-Gon's voice sounded strained.

Obi-Wan sensed something... “You're wounded, Master,” he said in concern.

“I'm healing now. I ran into some bandits,” Qui-Gon explained. “But I found the hill people as well.”

“And Elan?”

“I found her,” Qui-Gon said. “My masked rescuer turned out to be the one I sought. But I haven't had much success. She thinks the Queen is lying to further some plan of her own.”

“That could be true,” Obi-Wan said.

“And you?” Qui-Gon asked. “Have you discovered anything?”

“I think the Queen is being poisoned,” Obi-Wan said. Hurriedly, he explained his suspicions and his visit to the substance analysis lab.

Qui-Gon's face grew grave. “This is very bad news,” he said.

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“Who could it be?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Ask yourself who would benefit from her death,” Qui-Gon said. “If she dies, the elections could be suspended by her successor.”

“Bejul!” Obi-Wan cried. “But would he poison his own mother?”

“He might,” Qui-Gon said. “Though I don’t think so. I think under his anger there is genuine affection.”

“I’m not so sure,” Obi-Wan muttered. He didn’t have a very good opinion of the Prince.

“Or it could be someone who wants the royal line to continue,” Qui-Gon continued. “Like Giba. Or it could be someone whose motive isn’t obvious. You must be careful, Padawan. You must have proof. Maybe when the substance analyzer gives you the poisonous agent, you will be able to figure out the culprit. Didn’t you say that Jono brought the nightly tea?”

“It can’t be him,” Obi-Wan said. “He only picks it up in the kitchens and delivers it.”

“You sound very sure of your new friend,” Qui-Gon replied neutrally. “But sometimes the obvious is the answer.”

“I am sure of him,” Obi-Wan said. Annoyance rose in him at Qui-Gon’s suggestion. His Master had chosen to leave Obi-Wan in charge at the palace. Why couldn’t Qui-Gon trust his judgment?

“In the meantime, you must warn the Queen,” Qui-Gon said. “I see no other way. She must only take food from those she trusts. Better yet, she should prepare it herself.”

“Are you coming back soon?” Obi-Wan hoped the answer would be yes.

“In a few days. My wounds might prevent me from traveling.”

“But you said you were healing!” Obi-Wan protested.

“But they don’t know that. Elan won’t take well to hearing that her healing arts are slow. She is proud of her skills.”

“Elan is a healer?” Obi-Wan asked. A thought struck him. “But that means she could know about such things as poisons.”

Jude Watson

Qui-Gon's tone turned stern. "That is quite a jump in logic, Padawan. Are you saying Elan could have something to do with the Queen's illness? She never comes to Galu."

"But we don't know that," Obi-Wan argued. "You said she was in disguise when you met her. What if she had knowledge of her position as heir? You asked me who would benefit from the Queen's death. Isn't Elan that person?"

"She didn't know she was the heir," Qui-Gon said shortly.

"Or so she pretended," Obi-Wan said stubbornly. If Qui-Gon could accuse Jono, why couldn't the web of suspicion extend to Elan as well?

"Concentrate on the palace," Qui-Gon said. Obi-Wan heard disapproval in his voice. "I will handle Elan."

The communication faded. Obi-Wan slipped the comlink back in his pocket, disappointed in their exchange. Sometimes it felt as though he and Qui-Gon would never achieve the mind communion that is the mark of the ideal Master-Apprentice relationship.

Obviously, Qui-Gon had not been able to convince Elan that she was the heir to the crown. Why was he wasting his time with the hill people?

Obi-Wan followed the path back to the kitchen gardens. As he rounded a corner, he almost ran into Jono.

"Obi-Wan! There you are," Jono said. "I left a tray for you. Fresh juna berries for you this morning. Very sweet."

Obi-Wan nodded and headed back toward the palace. Jono had been so close. Had he heard Obi-Wan's communication? Was Jono a spy for Giba and Beju after all?

Chapter Ten

Obi-Wan guessed that the Queen was being poisoned with her night tray, but he couldn't be absolutely sure. He had no way of knowing how long the poisonous agent took to act. He couldn't take any chances with the Queen's life.

He hurried to the Queen's chambers. The Queen sat in the outer chamber in her morning robe. Dark circles were under her eyes, and her long hair fell lankly down her back. The table was set for her breakfast—tea, fruit, and a protein cake. She was just lifting the tea to her lips with a shaking hand...

"No!" Obi-Wan cried. He sprang forward and knocked the cup away. It fell and smashed on the stone floor.

The Queen slowly turned to stare at it. "That was part of my betrothal gift," she said.

"I think you're being poisoned, Queen Veda," Obi-Wan blurted.

The Queen seemed to move her head with difficulty. She fixed her eyes on him. "What did you say?"

"I don't know who it is," Obi-Wan said desperately. "I have no proof—not yet. But if it is true, you must not drink or eat anything that is prepared for you."

"This is impossible," the Queen whispered.

Jude Watson

"Impossible it is," Prince Beju announced, striding in. Giba followed on the Prince's heels. "The Jedi is lying!"

"Why would he lie, my son?" Queen Veda asked weakly.

"To discredit the palace," Prince Beju answered. "Or for some other reason we have yet to discover. I do not trust either of them, Mother!"

"And where is the other?" Giba demanded silkily. "Time and time again I have asked to see him, only to hear that he is resting, or walking about. I do not believe it! This Jedi lies already, I think. So why should he not lie about this?"

"You both are ready to accuse me. Strange that you do not give a thought to whether what I say is true," Obi-Wan pointed out. "Even if there is a chance that it's true, I would think you would be concerned. Look at the Queen. She grows weaker every day."

The Prince turned to his mother. His angry look faltered for a moment, and he took a half step toward her. Then he collected himself and turned to Obi-Wan. "My mother's illness is not your concern. And spreading lies about it doesn't help her. It only upsets her! Perhaps Qui-Gon Jinn is mixed up in this poisoning you speak of. Giba is right. It is strange that we haven't seen him. He agreed to our rules, and then broke his promise. He is capable of anything!"

"Qui-Gon has gone to the mountains to try to convince Elan to bring the hill people to vote," Obi-Wan said. It was a half truth, but at least it gave an explanation for his disappearance. He could not reveal the Queen's secret.

"What a ridiculous story!" Prince Beju scoffed. "Why would the hill people make a difference? Why should we care what they think? Obviously, you are lying again."

The Queen pushed herself to her feet. The act seemed to cause her great effort. "He is not lying, Beju," she said. "I know it. I asked Qui-Gon to contact Elan. For me."

"But why?" Prince Beju asked, wheeling around to face his mother.

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“Because she is your half sister,” Queen Veda replied steadily. “It is time you knew. Your father had an early marriage, and a child. He divorced his wife and abandoned the child. The decision haunted him—”

“I don’t believe it!” Prince Beju shook his head. “Now *you* are lying. Father would not act so dishonorably. Family is the cornerstone of life on Gala. How often he said that. He would not disgrace the Tallah name by marrying a hill person. And he would not abandon his child! You know this!”

“I am sorry to tell you this, Beju,” Queen Veda said gently. “It is true. He regretted it. He wanted to make it right.”

“You defile Father’s memory,” Prince Beju whispered in horror. “Will you go to any length to shame me?”

The Queen turned to Giba. “Tell him,” she begged. “You were there. You know it is true.”

Giba shook his head. “I’m sorry, Queen. I will do anything for Your Highness. Except lie for you.”

The Queen staggered backward. Obi-Wan moved forward to support her.

“Now I see it all,” Prince Beju raged. “You are in league with the Jedi. You have conspired against me. You will do whatever it takes to make sure I do not gain the crown.”

“No, Beju, my son,” Queen Veda said weakly. “No—”

“I am calling the guards,” Prince Beju said firmly. He moved toward the tubes mounted in the wall.

Obi-Wan was still holding on to the Queen’s arm. He could feel her shaking. She was close to collapse. Yet with a sudden burst of strength, she pulled away from Obi-Wan. She had time to give him a look that told him to run. Then she staggered forward and collapsed against her son.

Prince Beju was thrown off balance. He held on to his mother so that she wouldn’t fall. Giba took a step forward to help him.

Obi-Wan quickly ran out the door.

Chapter Eleven

Obi-Wan fled. He burst through the door to the gardens and saw the flick of a silver robe as the elder council member with the milky blue eyes moved off into the trees. Obi-Wan turned in the opposite direction and snaked through the orchard. He had to leave the palace grounds, and he could not leave by the main gate. He was sure now that Giba was behind the Queen's poisoning. The only question was if Prince Beju knew about it. The Prince had seemed genuinely stricken by his mother's condition.

He heard running footsteps behind him. Obi-Wan quickened his pace. He was almost to the high stone wall that surrounded the palace grounds.

"Obi-Wan! Wait, friend!"

It was Jono. Obi-Wan hesitated. Could he trust him? He wanted to trust him. He liked him.

But had it just been a coincidence that Giba and Beju had burst into the room while he was talking to the Queen? Had Jono followed him there from the gardens, then run to fetch them? Qui-Gon's warning lay heavy on his heart.

"Please!" Jono called. In another moment, he would round the turn of the path. What if he was bringing the guards? Obi-Wan still had time to run.

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I knew you would return.... I have waited for a friend for a long time, Obi-Wan.

He remembered the look in Jono's eyes that day, wistful and sincere. Jono had trusted him. Obi-Wan had to return the favor. Obi-Wan stopped short.

Jono burst into sight, his blond hair flying. He almost slammed into Obi-Wan, but instead tripped and went flying.

"Ow!" he cried, rubbing his knee. He pushed his hair out of his eyes and grinned. "That will teach me to try to catch a Jedi."

Obi-Wan helped him to his feet. "You can run fast."

"That's why you need me," Jono said. "You must let me help you. I was coming to attend the Queen. I heard what happened. Do you really think the Queen is being poisoned?" he ended on a whisper.

"Yes, I do," Obi-Wan said.

"Beju has called the guards. It's not safe here, Obi-Wan. They're already searching for you."

"I was just about to leave," Obi-Wan told him.

"But where will you go?" Jono asked, frowning.

"I'll hide in the city," Obi-Wan said. "I'll wait for Qui-Gon to return."

"They will catch you," Jono said. "There are spies everywhere. I must go with you. And I know where we should go."

"Where?" Obi-Wan asked.

"To Deca Brun," Jono said firmly. "He will help us."

Deca Brun's headquarters were in a crowded, bustling area of Galu, in the middle of shops and tall residential towers. Red banners proclaiming his name flapped from almost every window. Large posters of a smiling Deca were plastered on walls. Written on the bottom in Deca's bold handwriting was: I AM YOU! WE ARE ONE!

"It was Deca who showed us that we are all Galacians," Jono told Obi-Wan as they approached the building. "Before, family lineage was the most important tie on Gala. The great families of

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Gala—the Tallahs, the Gibas, the Prammis, and others—received the favors of the court. It was Deca who said that we owed loyalty to each other, to all Galacians.” The boy’s face shone with pride. “He made me realize that there was a world outside the palace.” Jono pushed open the door. The office was filled with campaign workers. Some tapped on datapads, others huddled in groups, talking earnestly.

One tall, bony Galacian caught sight of Jono. He grinned and waved him over. “Jono! Come to volunteer, have you?”

Jono headed for the man. “Sila, this is my friend Obi-Wan. We need to see Deca at once.”

Sila smiled. “So do we all, Jono,” he said. “He’s hard to track down. He’s everywhere. Making speeches, meeting new supporters...”

“But this is important,” Jono insisted.

Sila’s smile faded. “I can see that,” he said. “He could be in his private quarters.” He hesitated. “Come with me,” he said.

Obi-Wan nodded at Jono to go ahead. He took a seat against a wall. Suddenly a young woman stuck her head in the front door. “Rally on Thrush Street,” she called. “Aren’t you all coming? We need help.”

The Brun workers sprang to their feet, grabbing banners and laser signs. “Hold down the fort,” one of them yelled at Obi-Wan. He nodded.

In seconds, the room had cleared out. Someone had left a holofile open on the desk near him. Obi-Wan leaned over it.

A familiar name caught his eye. OFFWORLD.

A chill ran though Obi-Wan. He and Qui-Gon had tangled with Offworld recently. The corporation was a ruthless organization that enslaved beings for their vast mining operations. They plundered planets, depleted their natural resources, and then moved on.

And Offworld was headed by Qui-Gon’s enemy, his former apprentice, Xanatos.

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Obi-Wan touched the scrolling device. As far as he could make out, Offworld had donated a large sum to Deca Brun's campaign. The money had been funneled through several names of other Galacian companies.

Obi-Wan closed the file and scrolled through the remaining file titles, but there was no other mention of Offworld. Then he saw a file marked GALACIAN MINING CORP.

He accessed it. It was a detailed plan for opening up half of tiny Gala to mining operations. This would include the Galacian Sea, the largest source of fresh water for the planet—and the home of the few remaining sea people. Obi-Wan quickly read through the plans, which included importing workers from other worlds, building spaceports for the huge transports that were part of Offworld operations, and “recruiting” native Galacians for the work.

The company was a front for Offworld.

Deca Brun must have agreed to the plans in exchange for financial support, Obi-Wan realized. Deca claimed his treasury was based on small donations from the average Galacian. It was proof of his wide support. But instead, most of his campaign had been funded by Offworld.

Obi-Wan quickly shut down the holofile. He turned and hurried through the door where Jono had disappeared. He had to find the boy, get out of there, and warn Qui-Gon...

Instead, he ran into four blasters pointed at his chest. Four guards stood in the hallway. Behind them was another door. Obi-Wan heard the lock click behind him on the door he'd just run through.

“Give me your weapons, spy,” one of them said.

“I'm not a spy—” Obi-Wan began. Blaster fire suddenly erupted. Obi-Wan heard it whistle by his ear and thud into the wall behind him. Bits of stone flew out. One cut his cheek.

“Give me your weapons, spy,” the guard repeated.

Another guard came forward. He took Obi-Wan's lightsaber and comlink.

Jude Watson

“Do you know,” the guard said conversationally, “how much food it takes to feed Deca’s organization?”

Surprised by the question, Obi-Wan shook his head.

“Let me show you,” the guard invited. He pushed Obi-Wan forward roughly with his blasters.

They took him to a vast kitchen area. Then they opened a thick durasteel door and shoved him inside. It was a food storage area. Boxes lined row after row of shelves, and meat hung from hooks on a far wall. It was cold. Obi-Wan landed on the floor of the huge freezer. He heard the thick door shut, and the bolt shot home.

Chapter Twelve

As soon as Qui-Gon woke, he knew the storm was over. The wind had died, and an eerie stillness lay over the camp. When he cracked open the door of the dome, he saw a white blanket of snow, and a clear blue sky. Elan would want him to leave today. Qui-Gon gathered his things, trying to gather his thoughts as well. Was there another argument he had yet to try? He refused to give up. He sensed that Elan's participation in the election process was crucial for its success.

He ate a small breakfast and walked through the snow to Elan's dome. The hill people were already stirring. Children were playing in the snow. A man gathered late season berries from a bush. Dana waved at him from across the clearing, where he was carrying wood for an elder.

Qui-Gon knocked on the door of Elan's dome, and she called out an invitation to enter. She was mixing salves and potions at a work table in front of a small, cheerful fire. Qui-Gon remembered Obi-Wan's suspicions. He had discounted them immediately. Had he been wrong to do so? Yet something in Elan felt pure to him, felt real. He could not imagine her capable of condemning someone to a slow death by poisoning. Qui-Gon pulled up a chair next to her.

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"Don't get too comfortable," she said. "You're leaving this morning."

"The snow seems deep," Qui-Gon observed.

"We'll give you a swoop," she said. She began to rub herbs into a paste.

"My wounds still trouble me," Qui-Gon said.

"I'm making you some medicine," she answered, unperturbed. "Almost as good as bacta." She looked at him at last with a faint smile. "Do you think I will change my mind, Qui-Gon? If so, you don't know me."

"Ah," he said. "But I feel that I do."

The rumble of thunder suddenly rolled through the still air. The dome rattled with the power of it.

"Another storm," Qui-Gon said.

She grinned. "You'll make it."

The thunder rumbled again. Qui-Gon sat up straighter. When he looked at Elan, he saw that her smile had faded.

"That is not thunder," Elan said.

"Tanks," Qui-Gon replied.

When they ran from the dome, Dana was racing for them. "We're under attack," he said breathlessly. "It's the royal guard! I saw the insignia."

The rumble of tanks made the ground shake. Qui-Gon saw them approaching across a wide plain. The tanks were hampered by the deep snow, but they would make it. The hill people didn't have much time.

"We've got to divert them from the camp," Elan cried.

A shadow fell over the snow. Qui-Gon looked up. A massive royal guard transport ship banked over the camp. It landed in a snow-covered meadow near the moving tanks. Ramps slid down around the transport. More tanks rolled down.

"Proton tanks," Qui-Gon said. "The troops are inside. They won't risk exposure if they don't have to."

"The camp will be leveled," Dana said.

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Elan bit her lip, thinking. “The wind came from the northeast during the storm, right, Dana?”

“Yes, but...”

“Get everyone to the swoops,” Elan ordered crisply. “Have Nuni take all the children and elders to the safe shelter. And send Viva to gather my medicines. We... we could need them later. Quickly!”

Dana nodded and ran off. Elan turned to Qui-Gon. He admired her coolness in the face of such odds.

“And you, Qui-Gon,” she said. “I will need every swoop for battle. I can’t loan you one now. But you can escape down the back of the mountain that way.” She pointed to a narrow trail that snaked past the domes.

“I’ll take that swoop you promised me,” Qui-Gon answered.

“But I can’t—”

He activated his lightsaber and held the glowing green light front of her. “I will not leave your people unprotected,” he said.

The hill people were ready to go—everyone over the age of ten and under the age of eighty sat astride swoops, Qui-Gon guessed.

Elan swung a leg over her swoop. Qui-Gon did the same.

“Here’s the plan,” she told the others. “First, we buzz the tanks. Make them angry. Keep out of cannon range. Remember the zoomball game?”

Everyone nodded. She grinned at them, meeting as many eyes as she could. “Make the tanks the goalposts. Fly as though you’re up against the best zoomball players in the galaxy. We’re going to try to drive them away from the camp. Then when they’re good and mad, we’ll head to Moonstruck Pass.”

“Moonstruck Pass?” Dana asked. “But—”

Elan grinned. “Exactly.”

Qui-Gon didn’t have time to ask what they meant. Elan gunned her engines and took off. Within seconds she was just a dot in the distance. The others followed.

Jude Watson

Qui-Gon had driven speeders of various kinds and all sorts of flying vehicles. This was his first experience on a swoop. The engine controls, as well as the steering, were on the handlebars. He gunned the engine as Elan had, picked up speed, then corrected his direction slightly by turning the right handlebar. Immediately, the swoop flipped and headed for a tree.

“Lean away from the turn!” someone yelled to his left, and Qui-Gon leaned, holding on for dear life. Once he felt the swoop was under control again, he tried a more cautious correction. This time he was able to stay with the others, or at least keep them in sight.

Soon, Qui-Gon had a feel for the machine. It was more responsive than he was used to, but it was agile. Before coming in range of the ion cannons, he practiced diving and soaring and sharp turns, hanging in midair and then turning. Then he picked up speed to join the others, who were almost in range of the tanks.

Elan turned as he rode up next to her. “About time,” she said. Her grin was friendly, as though they were out for a pleasure ride. “Think you can handle that machine?”

“I’ll do my best,” Qui-Gon answered, just as cannon fire ripped into a tree to his left.

“You’ll need to,” Elan answered. She turned her handlebars sharply to the right, avoiding another blast from the cannon.

The swoops spread out in formation, dived, and zoomed upward again. They charged forward to the tanks, then retreated. Soon, Qui-Gon caught the rhythm. He understood why Elan had likened it to a game. The tanks were clumsy compared to the small, agile swoops. They were able to fly up high, then zoom downward into the mouths of the cannons, then turn away before the royal guard had a chance to fire.

Elan and Dana led one tank on a chase, losing it in some undergrowth. Qui-Gon heard a tremendous crash, and a cheer went up among the hill people. The tank had fallen nose-first into a ravine.

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“Moonstruck Pass!” Elan called. She reversed her engines, hovering in midair as another cannon blast missed her by a hair. Then she zoomed down, heading down the mountain but constantly zigzagging from right to left, up and down. Qui-Gon followed the dizzying trail.

The tanks found it hard to keep up. Qui-Gon imagined that they had thought the battle would be simple. They would train their massive guns on the camp, destroy it, then capture the survivors. They did not expect the hill people to lead them on a chase down a mountain. If they were smart, they wouldn’t follow. But the royal forces were rusty. They hadn’t fought a tactical battle in generations. Most of their job had been putting down minor insurrections in the cities. They were long on strength and short on tactics.

But Qui-Gon knew better than to underestimate those tanks. Once they caught Elan and the hill people, their firepower would eventually win the day. How could bowcasters and a few blasters—and one lightsaber—hold out against such weaponry?

Qui-Gon stayed at the rear of the swoops, trying to draw ion cannon fire from the speeding tanks. He had no idea where he was heading. The mountains on either side began to close in. He began to worry. Soon, the swoops would be unable to maneuver freely, and that was their only tactical advantage.

Sunlight hit the snow ahead, blinding him. Suddenly, the swoops in front of him slowed down. Qui-Gon quickly scaled back, drifting uncomfortably close to the tank at his rear. The Force surged around him, warning him, and he swung to his left. Cannon fire missed him by inches. He felt the hot breath of it sear his back.

Qui-Gon zoomed forward to catch up to the other swoops. The sun was so bright on the snow that he could hardly see. He used the Force to guide him. He realized that the trail he was following narrowed even further, the canyon ahead curved back in on itself from above, forming a kind of bowl. They would

Jude Watson

surely be trapped there, he thought. Had Elan lost her way? Or did she have a plan in mind? He just wished he knew what it was.

He caught up to the other swoops, who were now hovering high above the pass into the canyon. Qui-Gon joined them. When the tanks arrived, the swoops would be cut to pieces.

Jedi are ready to meet death at any moment. But did Elan have to *invite* it?

The tanks roared ahead, picking up speed as the royal guard realized they were about to trap the hill people. Ion cannons boomed now, more in triumph than according to plan. The tanks rolled into the canyon. The first maneuvered to fire on the hovering swoops...

And it suddenly sank into an enormous drift. Snow and ice caved in over the top. The second tank crashed through a skin of ice and was swallowed up. It was too late for the others to retreat. One by one, they crashed through the top of the ice-crusted snow and were swallowed up as well. In just moments, the tanks had completely disappeared.

Elan zoomed up next to Qui-Gon. The cold wind had turned her cheeks pink. Her navy eyes sparkled.

"I don't think you'll be needing that lightsaber, Jedi," she said.

Chapter Thirteen

Elan had known that with a northeast wind, the canyon would acquire drifts hundreds of meters deep. The lack of morning sunlight would cause ice to form a crust on the top. She had gambled that the tanks would roll in, anxious to capture the hill people.

Her gamble had paid off. The hill people had won the battle without one casualty. They could have left the royal guard buried alive in the snow. Qui-Gon could not have prevented it. He could not have dug the tanks out himself. But to his surprise, Elan organized a rescue operation. Using snow-borers that hovered only inches above the surface, the hill people dug tunnels into the snow, deep below to the tank entrances. They led the surprised and grateful battle soldiers to the surface, where they were flown back to the camp on swoops.

They were housed in the largest dome and brought blankets. Guards were posted at the dome door, but none of the soldiers wanted to escape. They were grateful for the warm shelter. Bandages and ointments were given to those who needed them. The crash into the snow had bruised a few. One soldier had sprained his wrist. The tank that had slid over into the ravine produced one woman warrior with a bruised temple. That was the extent of the injuries.

Jude Watson

Qui-Gon tried to raise Obi-Wan on the com-link. He needed to find out what was going on at the palace. Who had ordered the attack? Prince Beju? Qui-Gon knew one thing: Desperation had fueled the attack. That meant the situation could be volatile back at the capital.

Obi-Wan didn't answer. Qui-Gon pushed his worry away for the moment. He headed to Elan's dome.

"Now *I* have a problem," Elan grumbled when Qui-Gon entered. She was busy tending to an elder who had been grazed by a branch as he flew on his swoop. "What am I going to do with all of them? I can't set them loose in the mountains. Maybe you could lead them back."

She dabbed ointment on the elder's forehead, then gently bandaged it. "You should have gone with the rest of the elders, Domi," she scolded.

"I'm too young to be an elder," Domi said.

Elan sighed as she rinsed her hands. "Now we have to feed them all. We're going to be out of supplies in a week."

Still grumbling, Elan headed off. Domi grinned at Qui-Gon.

"She's got a soft heart, our Elan," Domi said.

"And a tough bite," Qui-Gon said.

Domi laughed. "True." He touched his bandage gingerly. "She has healing hands, like her father."

"You knew her father?" Qui-Gon asked curiously.

"Rowi's memory is still cherished by our people," Domi answered. "He knew every herb in the mountains. He passed on his potions to Elan. And her mother Tema was known for her spirit. She was one of the few to leave us. She was restless, wanted to see the world outside. But she returned. Hill people always return." Domi slid off the stool.

"Where did Tema go?" Qui-Gon asked.

"To Galu, where they all go," Domi answered. "And they all return. Tema was an artisan, and she heard the palace needed workers. She wanted to see life outside the hills. She never spoke

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of what she found there. I never had an inclination to go, myself. I would miss the mountains.”

Smiling, Domi headed out. Qui-Gon frowned. So Elan had lied to him. Her mother had traveled to Galu, after all. And she had worked at the palace. Elan must be afraid, he realized. He had shattered her world, her belief in where she came from. She might push his words away. But she would not be able to forget them.

Elan had been to the kitchen dome, but had already left when he arrived. Food preparation was under control. Qui-Gon headed to the dome where the prisoners were kept, hoping to find her there. He nodded at the posted guard and went in. The soldiers had gathered in small groups, talking quietly. Elan wasn't present. Qui-Gon saw an officer sitting alone by the heating unit. His tunic was stained, and his hand was bandaged. He stared dully at the glowing bars of the heating unit.

Qui-Gon sat next to him. “Are you all right?” he asked quietly. “Do you need a medic?”

“He said they were barbarians,” the officer said numbly. “He said they killed for sport and would attack the city next. Instead, they rescued us from suffocation and starvation. He said they must be annihilated to save Galu. He said they had no mercy. Instead, they gave us blankets.”

“Who said this?” Qui-Gon asked. “Prince Beju?”

“Take orders from that pup?” The officer shook his head. “It is Giba who gives us the orders. And he deceived us.”

Qui-Gon had to talk to Obi-Wan. Giba had to be stopped. If he was willing to destroy the hill people to kill Elan, he was no doubt engineering some sort of takeover of the government. Once again, Obi-Wan did not answer his call. Now Qui-Gon was truly worried. Something was wrong. His Padawan knew the importance of keeping in touch.

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Suddenly, Qui-Gon felt a disturbance in the Force, a ripple of distress. It could only be from Obi-Wan. He must return to Galu immediately.

He searched for Elan, finally locating her as she was leaving the children's dome. He quickly told her that Giba had been behind the attack.

"What is it to me?" she asked, avoiding his gaze.

"This attack was planned in order to destroy you," Qui-Gon said. "If he had to destroy your people, he would do it. Doesn't that tell you how desperate he is? You will not be safe until Gala elects a governor. And that governor will no doubt be under his control, so you will not be safe even then. Giba will go to any lengths to get what he wants. We think he is poisoning Queen Veda."

Elan paled. Qui-Gon's belief in her surged again. She looked shaken. "I told you, the Queen is nothing to me," she murmured.

"I know you lied about your mother," Qui-Gon said quietly. "She worked at the palace. Can't you admit the possibility that the Queen is telling the truth? I fear she is being punished because she shared that truth with me, and with you."

Elan turned her face away. She stared at the trees.

"Gala will fall without you," he said. "I must return. Come with me. Take a stand."

Elan's eyes were stormy as she turned back to face him. "I will not be a princess," she warned.

"Nor should you be," Qui-Gon replied. "Elan is enough."

Chapter Fourteen

He couldn't feel his feet. Obi-Wan slipped off his boots and rubbed them to restore circulation. He had been locked inside the freezer for hours now. He had kept walking continuously in order to keep warm. He had called on the Force and visualized it as heat as well as light.

He slipped his boots back on. He reached into the inner pocket of his tunic for the river stone Qui-Gon had given him on his thirteenth birthday, when he had officially become his Padawan. The stone felt warm and he rubbed it between his palms.

He knew he was growing exhausted. He could not keep walking forever. He closed his eyes, sending a Force-amplified message to Qui-Gon. *I am in trouble, Master. Come back.*

What was Deca Brun planning? Did he realize that he was in league with a corrupt corporation that would plunder his planet? Did he know how evil Xanatos truly was?

Obi-Wan's biggest worry was that Deca would contact Xanatos and tell him he had a Jedi locked in his freezer. Once Xanatos heard Obi-Wan's name, he would know that Qui-Gon was near. And once Xanatos knew that, he would try to trap Qui-Gon. He had sworn to destroy him.

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Obi-Wan had to escape. He had to warn Qui-Gon that Xanatos was involved. He heard faint noises outside the freezer door. Perhaps someone was coming to release him! Obi-Wan sprang to his feet. He pressed his ear against the door, ignoring its coldness.

The voices came to him dimly. He used the Force to help him screen out the other noises: the constant hum of the freezer, his own breathing. He focused on what was happening outside.

"I don't care," someone said. A boy's voice. "I've got my job, too. I've got a turbo cart full of meat here to deliver. It's already paid for. There will be no meals for a week if I don't get it in that freezer. You can answer to Deca Brun. I won't."

"No one goes in or out," the guard answered gruffly.

Obi-Wan focused the Force like a laser. *Then again, we all need to eat.*

"Then again, we all need to eat," the guard said. "Don't move, there! I'll push it inside."

Obi-Wan heard the lock fall away. He stepped away from the door. It opened, and a cart began to roll toward him, completely filling the doorway. Obi-Wan sprang forward. He pushed against the cart with all his strength, again using the Force to help him. The heavy cart shot back, straight into the guard.

The delivery boy gave the cart an extra shove as it flew by. It slammed against the wall, pinning the guard. He let out a cry of anger and pushed against the heavy cart. It didn't move.

The delivery boy took off his long-billed cap. It was Jono.

"Nothing like teamwork," he told Obi-Wan, grinning.

"Thanks for the rescue," Obi-Wan said gratefully.

They ran down the hall and burst into a deserted office. The faint streaks of a rising sun filtered through the window. Obi-Wan hesitated.

"My lightsaber," he said. "And my comlink—"

"We can't search now," Jono interrupted. "They'll all be here soon." He tugged at Obi-Wan's elbow. "Prince Beju has jailed

the Queen. She's refused all food. I'm worried, Obi-Wan. I think she's dying. Come on!"

An early-morning hush lay over the city. The gray light was tinged with pink. Galacians were beginning to stir. Cafes were beginning to open along the main boulevard as they hurried by.

"I spoke to the other Council members," Jono told Obi-Wan. "It was a risk I had to take. They want you to meet with them to discuss what to do about Giba. They've formed an alliance against him. Imprisoning the Queen was a mistake. Giba and Prince Beju have gone too far."

"First I have to see someone," Obi-Wan told Jono.

Jono shot him an incredulous look. "But there's no time to lose. Today is election day, Obi-Wan!"

"This is important, Jono," Obi-Wan said firmly. "I have to stop at the substance analyzer's. If he's identified the agent, we'll have proof that the Queen is being poisoned. We need that proof."

Jono shook his head. "We can't, Obi-Wan. The Council Ministers are waiting. I promised to bring you there immediately."

"If we know what is poisoning the Queen, there might be an antidote," Obi-Wan argued.

Jono bit his lip. "But—"

"It's this way," Obi-Wan said, pointing down a side street. He turned the corner, knowing Jono would follow.

It was only a few quick minutes to Mali Errat's lab. It was shuttered and dark, but Obi-Wan pounded on the door. Mali stuck his head out of a window on the second story. His fringe of white hair made a wispy halo around his head.

"Who is it?" he roared. "Who comes so early in the morning!"

"It's me, Mali!" Obi-Wan called. He stepped out into the street so that the technician could get a good look at him.

"Impatient young man! Where have you been?" Mali cried, pounding excitedly on the windowsill. "I have your results. I'll be right down." Seconds later, the door opened. Mali stood in the

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doorway in his unisuit. A datasheet fluttered in his hand. "I am a genius!" he proclaimed.

"What did you find?" Obi-Wan demanded.

"I searched every record of chemical agents in the galaxy," Mali said. "Every engineered compound, every secret poison, every chemical... and do you know why I could not find your agent?"

Obi-Wan shook his head impatiently.

"Because it was a *natural* agent!" Mali roared.

"What a surprise! Who uses them anymore? No one! It is dimilatis. An herb! It grows in the sea plains of Gala. A pinch or two is harmless. But the local people know that if it's dried, and used in certain concentrations, it mimics the effect of a wasting illness. Ultimately fatal, of course."

"If it grows on the sea plains of Gala, it's probably in the palace gardens," Obi-Wan said, thinking.

"Come on, Obi-Wan, let's go," Jono urged. "We have to tell the Council."

"Is there an antidote?" Obi-Wan asked.

Mali held up a vial. "I have made one up. It will cost you—"

Obi-Wan stuffed all his credits in the elder's hands. He grabbed the vial. Urging Jono to hurry, he raced toward the palace.

Jono led Obi-Wan to a part of the palace he'd never visited, high in the tower overlooking the gardens.

"I need to get to the Queen," Obi-Wan said impatiently.

"They told me I should bring you here," Jono said nervously. "The guards are on the lookout for you. You'd never make it. They will bring you to the Queen."

Obi-Wan moved to the small window. He looked down at the leafy top of a great lindemor tree. Below it spread the orderly rows of the kitchen gardens.

"Do you know the gardeners well, Jono?" he asked. "Are there any among them who would plot against the Queen?"

"I don't know," Jono said.

"They would have to know a great amount about herbs," Obi-Wan said thoughtfully. "Or what about that council member with the blue-white eyes? He's always in the gardens."

"Viso is the Queen's staunchest supporter," Jono said.

"A council member would have access to the Queen's chambers," Obi-Wan said thoughtfully. "But still, it would be strange if he brought food." Access was the key, he knew. The poison would have to be brought to the Queen by someone above suspicion....

The thought shot through him like a laser. The green below him became a blur to his eyes. *Jono*. His friend was the only one who had access to the gardens and to the Queen. Qui-Gon had been right. Sometimes the obvious was the answer.

Jono had said he missed the sea. The poison had come from the sea plains. He had the daily duty of picking flowers for the Queen's bouquet. Easy to pick a bit of *dililatis*, too. And Jono was the one to deliver the Queen's nightly tea, as Qui-Gon had pointed out.

Obi-Wan turned. Jono backed up a step.

"What is it, Obi-Wan?" he asked. A look of concern was on his face, but Obi-Wan sensed his nervousness.

"It was you, wasn't it, Jono," Obi-Wan said gently. "You poisoned the Queen."

"Poison the Queen? I could not do such a thing!" Jono cried. "You know it could have been anybody!"

"But it wasn't," Obi-Wan said. "It was you."

Qui-Gon had often told Obi-Wan that he was often not in touch with the living Force. But now Obi-Wan could read his friend's guilt as clearly as a sensor. He saw desperation and fear in Jono's eyes. And something else: anger. He said nothing, just kept his eyes on Jono.

Slowly, the mask of innocence dropped from Jono's face. "And why shouldn't it be me?" Jono asked softly. "Thanks to you Jedi, I was almost exiled from the palace!"

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"But to kill the Queen..." Obi-Wan started slowly.

"Don't you understand, Obi-Wan?" Jono cried. "This is all I have! The Dunns have been part of the royal family for generations. It is what I was trained for, bred for. The honor of my family depends on me." Jono threw out his hands pleadingly.

"The *Queen* depends on you," Obi-Wan countered. "Your job is to protect her!"

Suddenly, Jono's face flushed with anger. "She would have turned me out into the streets," he said. "Once Deca Brun is elected, he will hire his people as servants. And where will I go? What will I do? Should I have to become like everyone else? Yes, I am a servant. But I live in a palace!" He flung the last word out proudly.

"Jono," Obi-Wan said sadly. "I trusted you."

The anger left Jono's face. "Then you made a mistake," he said softly. "You are my friend. I like you, Obi-Wan. But I guess I like living in a palace more."

Obi-Wan turned at the sound of footsteps. Giba was coming. He would certainly be imprisoned or killed.

"I'm sorry, Obi-Wan," Jono said. "Truly."

"Save your sorrow," Obi-Wan said, striding to the window. He leaped up onto the ledge and judged the distance to the ground. It was too far to fall. But the Force would guide him. "I don't need it," he said. Then, he leaped into midair.

Chapter Fifteen

The dazzling green of the lindemor leaves rushed up at him. Obi-Wan gathered the Force from the living things around him, centered it inside himself. He flew across the distance and grabbed at a lindemor branch as he fell. His fingers closed around it, and he swung forward, using the momentum to grab at the next branch down. Then to the next, and the next, until it was an easy leap to the ground. He didn't bother looking up. Giba was most likely already summoning the royal guards. He had to make it to the Council Chamber without being seen.

Obi-Wan slipped inside the kitchen door. He ran past the startled cooks, burst into the pantries, raced past the dining areas and found the hallway leading to the wing where the Council Ministry offices were located. The halls were deserted. Obi-Wan raced down the stone corridor, wishing he had his light-saber. He heard the sound of approaching footsteps moving at double time. He ducked into the first room he saw. He closed the door behind him and pressed himself against it. The footsteps hurried past. He let out a breath. Safe. For the moment.

He was in some sort of royal reception room. An ornate, gilded bench stood on a platform at one end. Rows of chairs faced it. Glittering tapestries were hung on the walls. Antique weapons were displayed behind the bench.

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There was another door at the far end of the room. Obi-Wan headed for it. He turned the handle and began to cautiously pull it open. Even as he did so, he felt it push from the other side. It flew open with the combined effort, and Prince Beju tumbled into the room. He found his footing immediately and turned with flashing eyes to Obi-Wan.

"Hiding like a coward, are you? It's no use. The guards are everywhere. They can be here in an instant." Prince Beju strolled toward the series of tubes that called guards and servants. He reached toward the red tube.

"You talk of cowards," Obi-Wan said coolly, hiding the desperation he felt. If Prince Beju touched that tube, he was lost. And so was the Queen. "And yet you summon the guards."

Prince Beju hesitated. "Are you calling me a coward, Jedi?"

Obi-Wan shrugged. "I am only drawing a conclusion. Since I've arrived here, you've spoken of me as a coward. But there has always been a guard within your call. What do words mean when they are contradicted by actions? I have faced you alone, but you only face me with others who will do your fighting for you. Am *I* the coward?"

Prince Beju flushed an angry red. His hand dropped. He strode to the case displaying antique weapons. He lifted the top and drew one out.

"Do you know what this is, Obi-Wan Kenobi?" he asked, flourishing it.

"It is a sword," Obi-Wan answered. He had never used the weapon, but he had seen drawings of it at the Temple. It was like a lightsaber, only made of metal.

Prince Beju held the sword up, then slashed downward at a tapestry. The rich fabric was rent in two.

"We keep the edges honed," he said. "I studied sword fighting as part of my royal training. My father insisted." He feinted a blow at Obi-Wan, who did not move.

"Do you think you could manage one?" Beju asked. "Or does a Jedi only fight with his own weapon? That way he always has

the advantage.” His teeth gleamed as he smiled tauntingly at Obi-Wan.

“Why don’t we find out?” Obi-Wan asked, keeping his tone neutral. He had to keep his mind focused on the battle ahead. He could not let the Prince’s jibes get under his skin.

Beju took another sword from the case and tossed it at Obi-Wan. Before his fingers had closed around the hilt Beju sprang forward with a downward blow. Obi-Wan had time to twist away, but not before the sharp blade slashed his tunic. He felt blood run down his arm.

“Had enough?” Beju asked mockingly.

In answer, Obi-Wan lunged forward. The clang of metal rang through the air as Beju parried his blow. Beju pushed back against him. Obi-Wan was surprised at how strong the boy was. He was in much better shape than Obi-Wan would have guessed.

Beju pressed forward, slashing at Obi-Wan, who parried each blow. His lightsaber training helped, but he was not used to the shock that traveled up his arm each time their swords tangled. The sword was heavier than a lightsaber, and his timing and footwork were off because of it. Beju pressed his advantage, driving forward, his sword glinting as it slashed through the air. For the first time, Obi-Wan had his doubts that he could defeat the Prince at his own game.

Doubt in battle, there cannot be. Always, in times of trouble, Yoda’s teachings rose in his mind. Belief, there must be. Belief, in the Force. Reach for it, you will.

Yes, he had an advantage that Beju did not. Obi-Wan reached out to the Force. He felt it build within him. Doubt left him. Belief rushed in. He would win because he had to win. The sword suddenly felt familiar in his hand. Its weight was reassuring, not strange. He leaped up on the royal bench and swooped down on Beju, the sword held high, then low, stabbing, jabbing, surprising the Prince with his moves. Beju staggered back, his sword held defensively, trying to stave off the fury of Obi-Wan’s attack.

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Obi-Wan's mind was clear. It was not clouded with hate or bitterness. He needed to stop Beju. He struck again, trying to loosen Beju's grip on his sword.

But the Prince rallied. Anger drove him, and anger backed by skill can be a powerful ally. Beju launched an offensive at Obi-Wan. He struck again and again as Obi-Wan repelled the attacks, feeling the power of Beju's blows move up his arm. His shoulder began to ache.

Sweat rolled down Obi-Wan's face. Beju lost his footing and staggered. They had been fighting for some time now. Prince Beju's face was red with exertion. Obi-Wan could feel his opponent's exhaustion. He hoped it would cause Beju to make a mistake.

He launched himself at Beju again. Obi-Wan drove him toward the corner. Now Beju was at bay, unable to evade him. With a downward blow, Obi-Wan dislodged the sword from Beju's grasp. The Prince dived for it, his hands closing around the hilt as Obi-Wan leaped over a chair to prevent him.

A voice behind them cracked the silence. "Enough!"

A hooded figure moved within their vision. He wore the silver robes of a Council Minister. Obi-Wan recognized the elder whom he'd seen mysteriously appear and disappear in the gardens. "You will lose, my Prince. Anyone can see that."

"I will not lose!" the Prince howled, just as Obi-Wan's foot came down on his wrist, preventing him from grasping his sword. "Besides, Viso," the Prince snarled, "how can you tell if I will lose? You're blind! You can't even see your own hand before you."

Obi-Wan studied the elder more closely. He realized for the first time that his milky blue eyes were sightless. With a swift movement, Obi-Wan reached down and snatched Prince Beju's sword from the floor.

"I saw you were losing some time ago," Viso said quietly. "This battle is not the point. You have denied the truth for too long. When a man does this, he loses."

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“Stop talking in riddles, old man,” Prince Beju said, rolling over and rising shakily to his feet. “Your stories have always bored me.”

“Queen Veda has not lied to you, my Prince,” Viso replied, serene in the face of Beju’s rudeness. “But your father did. Giba did. The men you worshipped lied to you. The mother who bore you did not.”

“Get out!” the Prince screamed. “I will have the guards throw you in jail for your lies!”

“Then you will have to prove that I lie. Don’t you want to see my proof first? Are you brave enough to face it?” Viso asked in the same calm tone.

Obi-Wan looked at Beju. He saw that the Prince could not back down. Viso had maneuvered him into a corner as surely as Obi-Wan had in battle.

“Fine, old man,” the Prince sneered. “Show me what you call proof. And then I will have the great satisfaction of throwing you in the tower jail.”

Viso bowed. He gestured for them to follow him. He led them out of the chamber, through another grand meeting room. He led them into a small antechamber beyond.

The room was completely empty. The walls and floor were of pale blue stone. On the floor an intricate design of interlocking squares had been traced in silver imbedded in the stone.

“Stand in the small square in the center, please, Prince Beju,” Viso said.

Prince Beju looked suddenly nervous. “The square within the square,” he said. “My father spoke of this. He never explained it. He said... he said when I was strong enough to face what it meant, I would be ready.”

“And are you strong enough?” Viso asked.

Prince Beju positioned himself in the center square. As soon as his feet hit the square, the walls began to glow. Obi-Wan watched in amazement as slender beams of golden light suddenly washed over Prince Beju in a flurry of shifting patterns. He could

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not identify where they came from. They seemed to arise from the air.

Then Obi-Wan noted that although the glittering beams cast shadows on the floor and walls, there was no shadow or mark on Beju.

“You see,” Viso said quietly. “There is no Mark of the Crown on you, my Prince. That is for another. You are not the heir.”

The Prince stepped off the square. The beams of light disappeared immediately.

Obi-Wan expected the Prince to bluster, to say it meant nothing. He expected him to rail at Viso, call the elder a fool or a liar. But the Prince did none of those things. He slowly sank to his knees. His head dropped into his hands. Obi-Wan saw his shoulders shake.

Viso drifted closer to stand at Obi-Wan’s shoulder. “Everything he knew has been taken from him,” he murmured quietly. “You must help him, Obi-Wan.”

Then Viso glided out, leaving Obi-Wan alone with the weeping Prince.

Chapter Sixteen

Help Prince Beju? Obi-Wan didn't even like him. Just moments ago, Beju would have cheerfully stabbed him through the heart. But Viso was right. Beju had lost everything he knew, everyone he worshipped. His father was his hero. Giba had replaced him. He had nothing to believe in anymore.

Obi-Wan crouched a short distance away from Beju. "Your father acted honorably at the end of his life, Prince Beju," he said quietly. "He revealed his deception. Your mother forgave him because he regretted what he had done. Sometimes regret is all we can give to those we wound."

Beju wrapped his arms around his knees. He kept his head down.

"My Jedi training tells me that to absorb a blow is to begin to recover from it," Obi-Wan continued softly. "Now you must decide what is best for you to do. Do you want to rule Gala as Prince?"

He didn't expect the Prince to answer. But Beju raised his head. He fixed his reddened eyes on Obi-Wan. The trace of tears was still on his face.

"I don't know what I want anymore," he whispered. "I don't know anything."

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"You are still Prince," Obi-Wan pointed out. "Elan does not want to rule. Until the elections, you are the Queen's rightful heir. So you have an opportunity. You can act like a Prince—you can rescue your mother and imprison Giba. If you are voted down by the people, you can leave a government that is still functioning and strong."

"Giba told me that the people would vote for me in the end," Prince Beju said numbly. "He told me that there was great affection for me. But when I walked through the city I saw the truth in my people's eyes and I could not face it. What can I do now? Today is election day."

"You can stop him," Obi-Wan said firmly. "He only wants to retain his power. He'll do it any way he can. If the people hear that the elections are not free, civil war could result. You must ensure that the elections go on."

Prince Beju frowned. "Giba is too smart to depend on me."

"What do you mean?" Obi-Wan asked.

He shrugged. "He would have a backup plan. Perhaps he has already ensured another way to win..."

Obi-Wan felt discouraged. Things at the palace kept doubling back on themselves. There was intrigue piled on intrigue. He wished Qui-Gon were here.

Just then, they heard the sound of shouting in the streets outside the palace. Obi-Wan sprang up and headed for the Council Chamber. Beju followed on his heels. They hurried to the window. Hundreds—maybe thousands—of people were heading down the hill into Galu. Some of them were on swoops. They herded a battalion of the royal guard, who marched between them. At the head of the group rode a woman, her silver hair streaming behind her. Next to her rode Qui-Gon. Galacians were spilling out into the street to see the sight.

"Whatever plan Giba has, it's over," Obi-Wan told Beju. "The hill people are coming to vote."

Chapter Seventeen

Qui-Gon found Obi-Wan waiting for him at the palace gates. His heart lifted at the sight of his Padawan.

"I tried to reach you on the comlink," he told him.

"I was unavoidably detained in a freezer," Obi-Wan said with a grin. "I see you convinced Elan to come after all."

Qui-Gon nodded. "When the royal guard attacked, she knew she was needed here. Where is Giba?"

Obi-Wan led Qui-Gon back into the palace. "Prince Beju has issued an arrest order. He can't avoid the guards for long."

"Prince Beju?" Qui-Gon asked, puzzled. He hadn't expected Beju to go against his ally.

"He realized that Giba wasn't to be trusted," Obi-Wan said. He frowned. "I just hope it isn't too late for the Queen. I sent a medic with the antidote, but she's very weak."

"You've been busy, Padawan," Qui-Gon told him, giving him a nod of approval. He had wondered about Obi-Wan's ability to handle things at the palace. When he hadn't been able to contact him, he'd been worried that he'd left his young Padawan with a situation beyond his abilities. Obviously, Obi-Wan had met difficulties and obstacles, and had surpassed them.

"You were right about Jono," Obi-Wan said.

Qui-Gon put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry to hear it."

Jude Watson

They entered the Queen's reception area. Prince Beju stood waiting. "Is Elan with you?" he asked Qui-Gon.

Qui-Gon shook his head. "She has gone to see Wila Prammi. I can arrange a meeting for you, if you wish."

The Prince frowned. "I do not know yet," he said hesitantly. "First, I must set things right here. Giba is being arrested as we speak."

"I think not!" Giba said, striding into the room. He waved a durasheet containing his arrest order. "This is signed by Prince Beju. It is invalid. You do not rule Gala, Prince." Giba gave them a chilling smile. "And you never will. When the Queen dies, another will take her place. Not you."

"I'm not dead yet." The Queen stood in the doorway. She had to brace herself against the frame, but she stayed erect, her chin high. "Guards!" she called in a weak voice to the two guards flanking her. "Arrest him."

From beneath his robes, Giba drew forth Obi-Wan's lightsaber. Qui-Gon started in surprise, but in less than a moment he activated his own.

"I do not think it wise to fight a Jedi with that weapon," he said pleasantly to Giba.

"I do not care for your opinion," Giba said, lunging toward him.

Qui-Gon's lightsaber was a blur of green as he expertly dodged Giba's clumsy blow, turned, and struck downward on Giba's wrist with a backward motion. The minister was disarmed and down before anyone could take a breath. Qui-Gon handed Obi-Wan's lightsaber back to him. The guards moved forward to arrest Giba.

"Wait," Giba said desperately. "You do not have to recognize the Queen's order. For years, you have come to me for orders. Obviously, the royal house is out of control. Did you not see what has happened? Elan has arrived with an army! Civil war is at hand. There is only one hope. We must throw our support to

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Deca Brun. It is too late for elections now. If you let me go, I will bring him here.”

“And why would Deca Brun listen to you, Giba?” Prince Beju asked.

“Because I am a wise and trusted Council Minister, dedicated to my beloved Gala,” Giba snapped.

“Where did you get that lightsaber, Giba?” Obi-Wan asked.

“I found it in the palace, of course,” Giba replied. “You were fleeing from the guards and dropped it.”

“I don’t think so,” Obi-Wan said. “A Jedi doesn’t leave a lightsaber behind. It was taken from me by Deca Brun’s men.”

“I wouldn’t know about that!” Giba snarled. “And I do not know what you are accusing me of.”

“I am accusing you of being in league with Deca Brun,” Obi-Wan answered, his tone firm. Qui-Gon looked at him, surprised. Was Obi-Wan bluffing, or did he have proof?

No one had noticed Jono slip into the room. “It is true,” he spoke up quietly. “Giba was afraid that the Prince would lose the election. He went to Deca Brun with a deal. He would find him money and support from sources outside of Gala.”

“Offworld,” Obi-Wan said. “I saw the records in Deca’s campaign office.”

Qui-Gon turned to Obi-Wan, surprised again. “You have been busy,” he murmured.

“In exchange, Deca would find a place for Giba in his new government,” Jono finished. “Giba would not take the chance that he would lose his power.”

“Arrest him,” the Queen repeated faintly.

The guards slipped electro-cuffs on Giba’s wrists, and he was led away.

“It’s over,” the Queen said.

Beju crossed to her. He slid an arm around her shoulders, supporting her. “Except for the voting,” he said. “Let the people decide.”

Chapter Eighteen

Wila Prammi was voted Governor of Gala by an overwhelming margin. Prince Beju dropped out of the race and threw his support to her. He got out the word about Deca Brun, revealing his alliance with Giba and Offworld. After talking with Wila, Elan supported her as well, bringing her the votes of all the hill people.

The celebration that greeted Wila's election spilled out into the streets. City people and hill people joined in cheers and song. Though Gala had been in danger of revolt, they had achieved a peaceful transition of power.

There was nothing left for the Jedi to accomplish on Gala. Qui-Gon was also concerned about the news that Xanatos had been involved in doings on the planet. His former apprentice must know by now that Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon were the Jedi who had been sent as guardians of the peace. His old enemy could come in search of him. Qui-Gon could not endanger the peace on Gala. It was better to disappear into the galaxy.

Qui-Gon went to the Queen's chambers for his last audience. He found the Queen standing at the window looking out over Galu. She wore a dark blue robe of shimmersilk. She wore no jewels, and her long hair was braided simply. The signs of illness

still dimmed her beauty, but Qui-Gon saw new signs of health in the slight color of her cheeks and the clearness of her eyes.

"I have been granted something unique, Qui-Gon, and something I did not expect," she said. "I will be alive to see my legacy play out. Beju will find a better life." She gave a rueful smile. "He doesn't realize it quite yet, but I have no doubt of it. Gala will be free and at peace."

"I spoke to Elan," Qui-Gon said. "She is returning to the mountains, but she's forged a bond with Wila. I don't think she'll isolate herself so completely again."

"I, too, spoke to Elan," the Queen said. "She's a remarkable young woman. She hasn't agreed to take the name Tallah, but she's considering it. She'd add it to her parents' name, of course. Stubborn to the last."

"And Jono?" Qui-Gon asked. "Obi-Wan is concerned about him."

"Even though Jono betrayed him," the Queen said. "It is good for all of us to forgive. Jono will be punished—or at least the boy will see it as punishment. He is being sent back to his family and will learn farming. He'll be like everyone else now."

"And perhaps he will learn something about the uses of freedom," Qui-Gon observed.

"I hope so," the Queen agreed quietly. "I hope we all do." She studied Qui-Gon for a moment. "Things have ended well. You've accomplished your mission. Yet you seem sad."

"I do feel sadness," Qui-Gon admitted. "I've tried to understand why. Sometimes our own hearts can be such a mystery."

The Queen nodded. "Just ask Beju," she said. "My son is just beginning to understand himself."

"I have been thinking of what I will leave behind when I die," Qui-Gon said. "I travel from world to world. My connection to each is so fleeting. What is my legacy?"

The Queen smiled. She extended her arms to take in the city of Galu below them. Outside, Qui-Gon saw people heading to

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work, gathering in the squares, talking on street corners. It was a peaceful, busy scene.

“This,” she said gently.

She said nothing more. But Qui-Gon understood every nuance of her meaning. For the first time since he’d landed on Gala, resolution beat again inside him, steady and strong. As a Jedi, he left behind justice and honor. It didn’t matter if his footsteps would disappear, or if years from now no one on Gala remembered that two Jedi had helped to ensure a peaceful transition for their planet. They would remember peace, and that was enough.

And he had Obi-Wan. With every mission, he was more convinced that his Padawan would become extraordinary, even among the Jedi. What he taught would live on. That was legacy enough.

And certainly, there were still more legacies to be found.

Qui-Gon had been with the Queen for some time now. Obi-Wan sat in the Council Chamber with Elan and Beju. The two did not speak to each other. Viso had asked both of them to meet him in the chamber. Obi-Wan wondered what the Council member was planning.

Viso entered the room. He threw back his hood and looked at them with his milky blue eyes, eyes that couldn’t see but still knew where to look.

“Thank you for coming,” he told them. “I want to show you something. You too, Obi-Wan.”

They followed him into the blue-walled antechamber. Viso directed Elan to stand in the middle of the middle square. As soon as her feet hit the mark, the power source in the walls began to glow. Beams of light shot out. Elan’s silver hair picked up the lights, making a silver-blue halo around her intent face. The golden beams suddenly surrounded her, whirling faster and faster. Then they diffracted into an explosion of dancing light.

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Elan appeared to glow. And then, Obi-Wan saw it. The outline of a crown fell on her heart.

“You see, Elan Tallah?” Viso asked. “You are Princess Elan.”

Elan looked down at the shadow on her chest. She touched it, then held out a hand and observed the golden light dancing on her skin. Then she stepped off the square. The beams retracted. The walls dulled. The room became an empty room again.

“The last princess,” Elan said.

Viso turned to Beju. “May I escort you back to your chamber, my Prince?”

Beju swallowed. He shook his head. “My name is Beju,” he said.

Elan smiled as she held out a hand. “Come, brother. Let us walk together.”

Obi-Wan watched as Elan and Beju left the chamber together, followed by Viso. Elan and Beju had both changed their whole notions of what was left to them by their parents. They had both forged a new path, taking up a legacy based on their characters, not their positions.

That, Obi-Wan decided, was the true mark of greatness.

He, too, was on a path he had not foreseen. The Jedi Code was as much a part of him as Tallah heritage was to Elan and Beju. His ties were no less important. He had found something unexpected on this mission, Obi-Wan realized. He had a renewed sense of purpose.

When he turned, he found Qui-Gon standing in the doorway, waiting. He wished he could tell Qui-Gon about his renewed commitment, about the questions he had struggled with while Qui-Gon was away, questions about his legacy and what that meant.

But his Master seemed so stern. Obi-Wan knew that Qui-Gon was already anxious to depart. Their next mission awaited them. Qui-Gon would tell Obi-Wan that he needed to focus on that. Ahead lay new questions, new struggles. *Always more questions than answers, there are*, Yoda had said.

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Qui-Gon interrupted Obi-Wan's thoughts.

"It is time to go," he said.

Obi-Wan nodded. "I am ready."

Book Five

The Defenders of the Dead

Chapter One

The starfighter darted closer to the surface of the planet Melida/Daan.

On the rugged terrain below, vast structures made of ebony stone hugged the ground, laid out in enormous perfect squares without windows or doors.

Obi-Wan Kenobi studied them through the viewscreen as he piloted the craft. "What do you think they are?" he asked Qui-Gon Jinn. "I've never seen anything like them."

"I don't know," the Jedi Knight replied, studying the landscape with keen blue eyes. "Storage warehouses, perhaps, or military installations."

"They could conceal tracking devices," Obi-Wan observed.

"I'm not picking up anything on the scanner. But let's fly lower just in case."

Without slowing, Obi-Wan piloted the craft closer to the planet's surface. Rocks and vegetation rushed past the viewscreen. With the engines at full power Obi-Wan kept a tight grip on the controls. One tiny adjustment could send them crashing.

"If we fly any lower, I'll be able to do a molecular scan of the topsoil," Qui-Gon remarked dryly from the copilot's seat. "You're flying too low at this speed, Padawan. If we come across

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a stray boulder, we may end up making an unscheduled crash landing."

His tone was mild, but Obi-Wan knew Qui-Gon would accept no argument.

Obi-Wan was Qui-Gon's Jedi apprentice, and one of the Jedi rules was not to question the order of a Master.

Reluctantly, Obi-Wan eased up slightly on the controls. The starfighter rose a few meters. Qui-Gon stared steadily ahead, still searching for a place to land. They were reaching the outskirts of Zehava, the main city on the planet of Melida/Daan, and it was crucial that their arrival be unnoticed.

The bloody civil war on Melida/Daan had been raging for thirty years. It was a continuation of a conflict that had lasted for centuries. The two warring peoples, the Melida and the Daan, couldn't even agree on a name for their planet. The Melida called it Melida and the Daan called it Daan. In a compromise, the Galactic Senate used both names separated by a slash mark.

Every town and city on the planet was hotly contested, with territory taken and lost in a continuing series of battles. The capital city of Zehava was under siege much of the time, as the boundaries between Daan and Melida constantly shifted.

Obi-Wan knew that Jedi Master Yoda was depending on them for success in this mission. He had chosen carefully among the many Jedi. This mission was important to him. Weeks ago, one of his brightest pupils, the Jedi Knight Tahl, had come to Melida/Daan as a guardian of peace.

Tahl was renowned among the Jedi Knights for her diplomatic skills. The two sides had been close to a settlement when war broke out again. Tahl had been badly wounded and captured by the Melida.

Just days ago, Yoda had succeeded in getting a message through to his original contact, a Melida named Wehutti. Wehutti had agreed to smuggle Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon into the city and help them to work for Tahl's release.

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The mission ahead was more difficult and dangerous than usual, Obi-Wan knew. This time, the Jedi had not been invited to settle a dispute. They were unwelcome. The last Jedi envoy had been captured, perhaps killed.

He glanced over at his Master. Qui-Gon's calm, steady gaze swept the landscape ahead. He betrayed no agitation or worry that Obi-Wan could see.

One of the many things Obi-Wan admired about Master Qui-Gon was his composure. He had wanted to become Qui-Gon's Padawan because Qui-Gon was well respected for his bravery, skill, and ability with the Force. Although they sometimes had their differences, Obi-Wan had a deep respect for the Jedi Master.

"Do you see that canyon?" Qui-Gon asked, leaning forward and pointing. "If you can land between the walls, we can hide the starfighter there. It's a tight fit."

"I can do it," Obi-Wan promised. Keeping his speed steady, he dipped down lower.

"Slow down," Qui-Gon warned.

"I can make it," Obi-Wan said, gritting his teeth. He was one of the better pilots at the Jedi Temple. Why did Qui-Gon always have to correct him?

He zoomed into the small clearing with only a centimeter to spare. But at the last moment - too late - he saw that one of the cliffs had a small outcropping. A groaning sound filled the cockpit as the side of the ship scraped against it.

Obi-Wan set the craft down and powered down the engines. He did not want to look at Qui-Gon. But he knew that being a Jedi meant taking responsibility for every mistake. He met his Master's gaze squarely.

He was relieved to see amusement in Qui-Gon's eyes. "At least we didn't promise to return the starfighter without a scratch," he said.

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Obi-Wan grinned. They had borrowed the transport from Queen Veda on the planet Gala, where they had successfully completed their last mission.

As they climbed down from the starfighter onto the rocky terrain of Melida/Daan, Qui-Gon paused. "There is a great disturbance in the Force on this world," he murmured. "Hatred rules this place."

"Yes, I feel it," Obi-Wan said.

"We must be very careful here, Padawan. When so much volatile emotion is packed into a place, it is hard to keep your distance. Remember you are a Jedi. You are here to observe and to help where you can. Our mission is to return Tahl to the Temple."

"Yes, Master."

The underbrush was thick and leafy, and it was easy to drag large branches and cover the starfighter. It would not be visible from the air.

Shouldering their survival packs, the two Jedi headed toward the outskirts of Zehava. They had been instructed to approach from the west, where Wehutti would meet them at a Melida-controlled gate.

It was a dusty hike through hills and canyons. At last the towers and buildings of the walled city were before them. They had kept off the main road, keeping to open country, and now they looked down at the city from a nearby cliff.

Keeping low to the ground, Obi-Wan scanned the desolate outskirts of the city. He saw no people on the streets. There was only one entrance to the city on the main road. At the break in the thick wall a guardhouse stood, bristling with laser cannons trained on the road. Two tall deflection towers flanked the guardhouse. Behind the wall they could glimpse the buildings perched on the steep hills of the city. Close to the wall was a long, low building of black stone, with no windows or doors.

"It's a smaller version of those square buildings we saw from the air," Obi-Wan observed.

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Qui-Gon nodded. "It could be a military building of some kind. And those deflection towers mean that there is a particle shield in place. If we attempt to enter without permission, we'll be blasted with laser fire."

"What should we do?" Obi-Wan asked. "We don't want to approach unless we're sure Wehutti is there."

Qui-Gon dug in his survival pack for a pair of electrobinoculars. He trained them on the guardhouse. "I've got worse news," he said. "I see a Daan flag. That means either the whole city is now controlled by the Daan, or the entrance is."

"And Wehutti is a Melida." Obi-Wan groaned. "So there's no way in."

Qui-Gon scuttled back to remove himself from sight. He slid the electrobinoculars back into his pack. "There is always a way, Padawan," he said. "Wehutti told us to approach from the west. If we follow the perimeter, we might find an unguarded area. Perhaps he's on the lookout. Once we're away from that guard tower, we can get closer."

Keeping to the cover of the shadow of the cliffs, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon made their painstaking way around the city's walls. When they were out of the guardhouse's sight, they moved closer. Qui-Gon's keen eyes swept every meter of the wall, searching for a break. Obi-Wan knew he was using the Force to test the way ahead, hoping to sense a break in the particle shield. Obi-Wan tried to do the same, but he could only feel glimmers of resistance.

"Wait," Qui-Gon said suddenly. He stopped and held up a hand. "Here. There's a break in the shield."

"There's another one of those black buildings," Obi-Wan pointed out. The long, low building sat next to the wall on the city side.

"I still don't know what they are, but I suggest we avoid them," Qui-Gon remarked. "We'll scale the wall near those trees."

"We'll need the Force," Obi-Wan said, eyeing the high wall.

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"Yes, but a carbon rope would help, too," Qui-Gon said, smiling. He put his pack down, then leaned over to root through it. "We'll need yours, too, Padawan."

Obi-Wan stepped closer to Qui-Gon, swinging his pack off his shoulder to the ground. His boots suddenly hit something with a clang. He looked down and saw he had displaced some dirt on top of a metal plate. "Look, Master," he said. "I wonder what this-"

He didn't get a chance to finish. Energy bars suddenly rose from the ground, trapping them. Before they could move, the metal plate slid open, and they fell into an abyss below.

Chapter Two

Obi-Wan was falling through some sort of metal tube. He tried to slow his descent with his heels, but they only clattered against the rough metal surface. His speed increased, and he tumbled forward, hitting his head on the edge of the tube and then spilling out onto a dirt floor.

He lay for a moment, stunned. Qui-Gon picked himself up immediately, his lightsaber in hand. He stood over Obi-Wan in case he needed protection.

"I'm all right," Obi-Wan said, his head clearing. He struggled to his feet, grabbing his lightsaber as he did so. "Where are we?"

"In some sort of holding cell," Qui-Gon answered. Smooth durasteel walls surrounded them. There was no crack or opening that Obi-Wan could see.

"We're trapped," he said. His voice bounced off the walls, sounding hollow.

"No, Padawan," Qui-Gon said quietly. "There is more than one entrance to this cell."

"How do you know?"

"Because we are not the first to fall into it." Qui-Gon explored the tiny space, using his lightsaber for illumination. "The tube we fell down is battered, and the dirt is disturbed by other footprints. The others have been taken out somehow, and

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it would be impossible to do so from the way we came in. This trap is engineered to capture, not kill. There must be another door. Besides," he added, "there are no bones or remains. That means that whoever set the trap removes who they capture."

"Eventually," Obi-Wan muttered. His stomach was empty, and he wished he'd had time to eat before he'd left the starfighter. "I lost my survival pack," he told Qui-Gon. "It's on the surface."

"Mine is as well. We'll have to use our lightsabers," Qui-Gon replied.

Obi-Wan had food in mind more than illumination, but he followed Qui-Gon's example and activated his lightsaber. He held it close to the walls surrounding him, examining them. As he worked, he felt the Force begin to move between them, filling the space.

He clearly saw every irregularity in the seemingly smooth walls. He searched for a hidden seam, sure now that they would find one. All he had to do was trust the Force.

As a student at the Temple, he had been mystified by the Force. He knew he was Force-sensitive - it was why he had been chosen to study at the Temple as a child. But throughout his training, he often found the Force elusive and unreliable. He was able to tap into it, but not every time he wanted to. When he did, he could not control it.

With Qui-Gon, he had learned that it was not his job to control it, but to join it. Now he could rely on it to guide him, give him strength and vision. He was beginning to understand how deeply it pulsed, how steady a presence it was. As a Jedi, he had constant access to it. It was the greatest gift he could imagine being given.

"Here," Qui-Gon said quietly.

At first, Obi-Wan could not see anything. But then he noticed the tiny hairline crack in the even surface of the wall.

Qui-Gon moved his hand over the seam. "Of course the locking device is on the other side," he mused. "I'm assuming it's

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blast-proof. But I'm also assuming that no Jedi has ever been trapped here before."

Together, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon moved the beams of their lightsabers down the outline of the door. The sabers cut through the metal, which curled back like a tender green leaf. A small opening was exposed.

Qui-Gon squeezed through, and Obi-Wan followed. He found himself in a short, narrow tunnel, which led to what he sensed was a huge space. It was pitch-dark, a darkness so black it held no shadows. Even the glow of his lightsaber seemed swallowed up by the absolute darkness.

They stopped, listening carefully. But not a sound moved through the space. Obi-Wan could not even hear his breathing, or Qui-Gon's. Jedi are trained to slow their breath so they make no sound, even when they are under pressure or stress.

"I think we are alone," Qui-Gon said quietly. His voice echoed, confirming Obi-Wan's belief that they were in a wide, open space.

They moved forward cautiously, lightsabers held in defensive position. Obi-Wan felt a trickle of perspiration snake down the back of his neck. Something was wrong here. He could feel it.

"The Force is dark," Qui-Gon murmured. "Angry. Yet I don't feel a living Force here."

Obi-Wan nodded. He could not have put his finger on what he felt, but Qui-Gon had been able to. Some deep-rooted evil was here, yet he did not feel a living pulse around him.

Obi-Wan's foot hit a ledge that he hadn't been able to see. He reached out to steady himself against a stone column. In that split-second of lost concentration, a flicker of movement came from his right.

He whirled, lightsaber held high. A warrior appeared, moving quickly toward him from the deep shadows, his blaster aimed straight at Obi-Wan's heart.

Chapter Three

Obi-Wan sprang, his lightsaber slashing forward. The beam did not meet flesh or bone, but passed harmlessly through the figure.

Surprised, Obi-Wan whirled to the left to launch another attack, but Qui-Gon stopped him.

"You cannot fight this enemy, Padawan," Qui-Gon said.

Obi-Wan looked closer. The warrior, he realized, was a hologram.

Suddenly, a voice boomed out. "I am Quintama, Captain of the Melida Liberation Force." The hologram moved his blaster to his side. "Tomorrow will commence the Twenty-First Battle of Zehava. It will doom our Daan enemies to destruction once and for all, and we shall achieve glorious victory. We shall recapture the city that we founded a thousand years ago. All Melida will live in peace."

"Twenty-First Battle of Zehava?" Obi-Wan whispered to Qui-Gon.

"The city has changed hands many times over the years," Qui-Gon remarked. "Look at his blaster. It's an old model. I'd say fifty years or more."

"I look forward to glorious total victory," the ghostly figure continued. "And yet there is a chance that in achieving that

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victory I will die. I accept my death willingly, as does my wife Pinani, who fights by my side. But for my children..." The booming voice faltered for only a moment. "... My children, Renei and Wunana, I leave the memory of the ancestors I have shared with them, the stories of our long persecution by the Daan. I saw my father killed, and I will avenge his death. I saw my village starved, and I will avenge my neighbors. Remember me, my children. And remember what I have suffered at the hands of the Daan. If I die, pick up my weapon and avenge me as I have avenged my family." Abruptly, the hologram disappeared.

"I guess he didn't make it," Obi-Wan said. He crouched down to a stone marker. "He died in that battle."

Qui-Gon moved past the marker and came to the next. A large golden ball was mounted on a column next to it. He placed his hand on it.

Immediately, another hologram rose from its marker like a ghost.

"I must have triggered the first one when I stumbled," Obi-Wan said.

The second hologram was a woman. Her tunic was torn and stained, her hair clipped short. She carried a force pike and had one blaster strapped to a hip, another to a thigh.

"I am Pinani, widow of Quintama, daughter of the great heroes Bicha and Tiraca. Tonight we march on the town of Bin to avenge the Battle of Zehava. Our supplies have been depleted. Our weapons are low. Most of us died in the glorious battle to retake our beloved city of Zehava from the ruthless Daan. There is no chance that our battle will succeed, yet we will fight for justice and vengeance against the enemy who persecutes us. My husband died before my eyes. My father and mother died when the Daan marched into our village and rounded them up and killed them. And so I say to you, my children, Renei and Wunana, do not forget us. Fight on. Avenge this great terrible wrong. I will die bravely. I die for you."

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The hologram blinked out. Obi-Wan crossed to the next marker. "Renei and Wunana both died only three years later in the Twenty-Second Battle of Zehava," he said. "They were barely older than me."

He turned and met Qui-Gon's eyes. "What kind of place is this?" he asked.

"A mausoleum," Qui-Gon said. "A place for the dead to rest. But here on Melida/Daan, the memories stay alive. Look." Qui-Gon pointed to the offerings that they now saw heaped on pedestals in front of the columns. The flowers were fresh, the trays of seeds and cups of water replenished.

They walked down the aisles, past row after row of graves, activating hologram after hologram. The vast, echoing space filled with the voices of the dead. They saw generations tell their stories of blood and vengeance.

They heard tales of whole villages starved and then slaughtered, children torn from their mother's arms, mass executions, forced marches that ended in suffering and more death.

"The Daan sound like a bloodthirsty people," Obi-Wan remarked. The accounts of suffering and agony had moved through him like growing pain from a deep wound.

"We're in a Melida mausoleum," Qui-Gon replied. "I wonder what the Daan have to say."

"There are so many dead," Obi-Wan observed. "But there's no clear reason why they fight. Battle follows battle, each one conducted to avenge the one before. What is the real dispute?"

"Perhaps they have forgotten it," Qui-Gon said. "The hatred is bred in their bones. Now they fight over meters of territory, or to avenge a wrong that happened a hundred years before."

Obi-Wan shivered. The damp, cold air had invaded his body. He felt cut away from the rest of the galaxy. His world had funneled down into this black, shadowy space full of blood, revenge, and death. "Our mission here hasn't even begun, and already I have seen enough suffering to last a lifetime."

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Qui-Gon's gaze was sad. "There are some worlds that manage to hold onto peace for centuries, Padawan. But I am afraid that many have seen terrible wars that scar the memories of each generation. It has always been."

"Well, I've seen enough for now," Obi-Wan said. "Let's find the way out."

They walked quickly now, hurrying past the markers, searching for an exit. At last they saw a square of brightness ahead. It was a door fashioned from a translucent material that emitted a white glow.

Qui-Gon pressed the exit indicator light, and they spilled out into the weak sunshine with relief. They remained in the shadow of the doorway, scanning the immediate area before moving on.

The mausoleum was perched on a ridge. Ahead of them rose a steep hill that ended in an overhanging cliff. A path wound through gardens to their left, a wall to their right.

"I guess we have to go that way," Obi-Wan said, pointing to the path.

"I suppose," Qui-Gon said. Still, he hesitated, his keen gaze searching the steep hillside in front of them. "But I-"

Suddenly, the dirt exploded in front of Obi-Wan's feet.

"Snipers!" Qui-Gon yelled. "Take cover!"

Chapter Four

The blaster fire came from the top of the overhanging cliff. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon leaped to the top of the wall on their right. Chips of stone splintered and flew as blaster fire ripped into the wall. Qui-Gon took a split-second to balance and survey what lay below. Then he leaped down, Obi-Wan directly behind him.

They landed in a small area with humming banks of machinery. Walls surrounded them on three sides, the mausoleum building on the other. They would be trapped here under fire, but at least the blaster fire could not reach them. Qui-Gon wondered fleetingly if the snipers would get bored and go away.

Unfortunately, in his long experience, *snipers* never got bored and went away.

Qui-Gon examined the machinery. "These must be the heating and cooling units for the building," he observed as blaster fire continued to rip over their heads.

"At least we're out of the line of fire," Obi-Wan said.

"I'm afraid we have a bigger problem," Qui-Gon said. He bent down to examine a metal tank. "This is full of proton fuel. If the blaster fire hits it, we'll be blown from here back to the starship."

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He exchanged a concerned glance with Obi-Wan. They would have to expose themselves to the snipers. They could not remain here and continue to draw fire.

"Let's see what's on the other side of that wall," Qui-Gon said, indicating the wall opposite to the one they had leaped over.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon summoned the Force. When Qui-Gon felt it grow and pulse around them, he jumped, along with Obi-Wan. As they leaped into midair, they took a quick survey of what lay on the other side, blaster fire suddenly intensifying around them. Qui-Gon deflected it with his lightsaber.

They fell back to the ground.

"It's a big drop down to that ravine," Obi-Wan reported to Qui-Gon. "Do you think we can make it?"

"The ground looks soft," Qui-Gon said. "That could help our landing, but if it's swampy, we could be in trouble. We don't want to be swallowed by a bog. Remember that the terrain of Melida/Daan can be treacherous."

"At least we'll surprise the snipers," Obi-Wan pointed out. "They won't expect us to risk it."

Qui-Gon nodded. "We can work our way around the cliff and scale it from the other side to surprise them further. The brush will cover us. They won't know which way we went, and probably won't expect us to attack."

"The only alternative, Master, is to go back over the wall. Once we made it to that path, we'd have shelter in the gardens."

Qui-Gon paused, thinking of their next move. While he considered the odds, he thought about the way he and Obi-Wan had come to function together as a unit. Though at times their relations could be bumpy, under pressure their rhythm matched, their thoughts clicked. He admired his Padawan's ability to operate on all levels. Even under great pressure, Obi-Wan could strategize, calculate odds and opportunities, and make a joke.

"If we try for the gardens, we lose the element of surprise," Qui-Gon said finally. "Remember this, Padawan: when one is outnumbered, surprise is your best ally. Let's try the ravine."

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Blaster fire pinged against metal, and Qui-Gon flicked an apprehensive gaze at the proton gas tank. "I think it's time we left. Don't forget there's a line of shrubs at the immediate bottom of the slope on the other side. Make your jump as wide as you can."

Qui-Gon reached out for the Force. It was always there, ready for him to tap into. It was his companion as much as Obi-Wan was. He pictured the leap he would have to make. Nothing was impossible when the Force was near. His body would do what it needed to do.

They backed up as far as they could for a running start. Then they ran forward three quick steps and took the leap. They cleared the wall easily - the Force and the momentum sent them sailing through the air, over the steep slope into the ravine.

Qui-Gon felt the swampy ground move under his feet as he landed, but it did not suck him down. Obi-Wan landed softly a short distance behind him.

"Hurry, Padawan," Qui-Gon urged.

Mud sucked at their boots, hampering their progress as they struggled to make their way around the cliff face. They could hear the blaster fire and then the thump of a proton grenade exploding. Qui-Gon turned. The grenade had fallen just short of the walled enclosure. But if one scored a direct hit on the proton fuel tank, it could help them. An explosion would be good cover for a successful assault.

At last they made it to the opposite side of the cliff. Here, the rocky ground sloped sharply upward. It would be a steep climb, but at least the ground was firm.

Obi-Wan moved quickly and tirelessly beside him, his physical strength backed by his strong will. Obi-Wan would learn grace as he grew older, Qui-Gon knew.

They slowed their ascent as they grew closer to the top of the hill. Surprise was not only helpful, but necessary. They had no idea how many snipers they would find.

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When they were close to the top, Qui-Gon gave the signal and they dropped to their knees. They lay flat, then squirmed up the remaining distance on their stomachs. Qui-Gon guided them to the shelter of a cluster of boulders at the hill's edge.

Four snipers were lined up on the cliff face, laying flat with their blasters pointed toward the mausoleum. Not bad odds for a Jedi, Qui-Gon thought.

Silently, he drew his lightsaber. Obi-Wan did the same. At Qui-Gon's nod, the two of them leaped up, activating their lightsabers at the same time. They made barely a whisper of sound as they moved.

Qui-Gon headed for the largest, strongest-looking sniper. Obi-Wan leaped toward the sniper about to fire a blaster rifle. With a single blow of Obi-Wan's lightsaber, the blaster rifle cracked in two.

Qui-Gon struck down at the largest sniper's weapon, and the blaster flew from his hand. The sniper rolled away to avoid the next blow, kicking out at Qui-Gon as he did so. The blow connected, sending fire through Qui-Gon's ribcage and surprising him. He was also surprised to note the sniper had only one arm.

A third sniper moved toward Qui-Gon with a vibro-shiv. Qui-Gon turned quickly to his left to avoid the blade, slashing down with his lightsaber to disarm the sniper. Obi-Wan launched himself at the fourth sniper and kicked his blaster rifle off the cliff.

Qui-Gon somersaulted backward as the one-armed sniper fired from a blaster he'd retrieved from an ankle holster. The blaster fire just missed him. The second sniper, who had lost his vibro-shiv, threw a proton grenade at Qui-Gon. The Jedi Knight leaped out of the way, and it sailed over the cliff.

Qui-Gon whirled to disarm his one-armed opponent, but suddenly he was shaken by an enormous explosion. The grenade had hit the proton gas tank. Qui-Gon felt air move against his skin like a wall of fire. His Jedi reflexes helped him stand his

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ground. Obi-Wan was also prepared. But the fourth sniper lost his balance with a cry, tumbling over the edge of the cliff. He grabbed a root and hoisted himself uneasily back to safety. Obi-Wan hovered over him, lightsaber ready, prepared to defend himself if necessary.

Qui-Gon's one-armed adversary kept his blaster steady. He was a little older than Qui-Gon. Underneath his plastoid armor his body was lean and strong. Synth-flesh covered one cheek. Qui-Gon guessed it had been recently applied since it did not have a chance to knit into living flesh.

The one-armed man's eyes flicked to Qui-Gon's weapon, and he laughed. "Is that the famous lightsaber I've heard so much about?"

Surprised to find himself having a conversation with a man desperately trying to kill him, Qui-Gon nodded.

The man grinned. "Jedi! We thought you were Daan!"

Qui-Gon did not lower his lightsaber.

The man tossed his blaster aside. "Relax, Jedi. By the strength of our mothers and the valor of our fathers, this is no trick. I am your contact, Wehutti. So you're here after all!"

Chapter Five

"We were told to meet you on the outskirts of Zehava," Qui-Gon remarked as he deactivated his lightsaber.

"I apologize for failing to meet you," Wehutti said, striding forward to greet them. "The message I received from the Temple was garbled. The despicable and evil Daan often jam communications. I sent back a message I would meet with Jedi representatives, hoping I would get further instructions. Right now, we are in the sector that the Daan plundered from us in the Twenty-Second battle. Until we have our vengeance, they control the outskirts of the city. I've been sneaking over for three days now, hoping I would find you somehow." He extended his palm outward in the local greeting. "You must be Qui-Gon Jinn."

"This is my apprentice, Obi-Wan Kenobi," Qui-Gon said.

Obi-Wan bowed to Wehutti. He was grateful that they had found their contact. They had barely been on Melida/Daan for an hour, and it was already apparent what a treacherous place it was.

Wehutti introduced his comrades as Moahdi, Kejas, and Herut. Herut clutched his sore wrist and glowered at Obi-Wan, who tried to look friendly.

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"It appears we are lucky to have found you," Qui-Gon said. "If the Daan control the perimeter, I'm surprised you would venture so far."

Wehutti's friendly face grew stony. "In the valiant spirit of our honored ancestors, we must protect our Hall of Evidence."

"Hall of Evidence?" Obi-Wan asked.

Wehutti gestured at the black monolith below where Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had wandered. "It is where we store the honored memories of our glorious dead. They are all warriors and heroes. If the lowlife Daan had their way, they would destroy our most sacred places. We need to show them they cannot enter."

"So the Melida and the Daan are still at war," Qui-Gon said.

"No, we have a cease-fire at the moment," Wehutti said. He drew a circle in the dirt with the toe of his boot, then a larger circle around it.

"The bloodthirsty Daan drove the Melida from their homes and contained them here, in the Inner Hub." He pointed to the inner circle. "The barbarians surround us on the Outer Circle. But victory will come one day. We shall retake Zehava. Block by block we will move outward."

Qui-Gon eyed the blaster on the ground. "You have a cease-fire, but I see you still shoot."

"The day I put down my weapon is the day that the Melida are free," Wehutti said quietly.

"What about Jedi Knight Tahl?" Qui-Gon asked. "Do you have news?"

Wehutti nodded. "I have spoken to the Melida leaders. They have come to see that holding a Jedi will not help our cause. A bit more negotiation might be called for, but I have every certainty that she will be released to your care."

"That is good news," Qui-Gon said.

Wehutti nodded. "Now we must go. It isn't safe here. Like our martyred ancestors, we are in danger every moment." He turned to Moahdi, Kejas, and Herut. "Gather the weapons. See if you can find the blaster rifle below. I'll see you back in the Hub."

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His three companions hurried off, gathering up the vibro-shiv and a damaged blaster before they left. Wehutti picked up his blaster and returned it to its holster. "We are very low on weapons," he explained to the Jedi. "Even damaged ones must be salvaged for the day of our vengeance."

"Are you low on med supplies as well?" Qui-Gon asked.

Wehutti nodded and pointed to his absent arm. "No plastoid limbs available, I'm afraid. Some were lucky to get them, but many were not. We ran through everything we had after the last battle of Zehava, and the government has no money to order more. But I do all right. The sacrifice of my people means more than my pain."

Qui-Gon touched the spot where Wehutti had hit him and winced. "You do just fine," he told his former attacker.

Wehutti led them back down the rocky slope and turned down a path that ran behind houses at the edge of a park. The park was filled with damaged and rusting starfighters and floaters.

"The Daan don't seem to have funds, either," Qui-Gon noted.

"The last war bankrupted both sides," Wehutti said cheerfully. "At least we're even." He handed the Jedi two yellow discs. "In case we're stopped, these are forged Daan identity cards. But let's hope we're not stopped."

Wehutti led them down twisting alleyways and through the rear gardens of grand houses, down tiny streets and over rooftops. If they saw people ahead, they ducked into the shadows of buildings, or simply turned in the opposite direction. A fine rain began to fall, keeping most people off the streets.

"You know the city well," Qui-Gon observed.

Wehutti's mouth twisted. "I lived in this area as a young man. Now I am forbidden to come here."

At last they reached a desolate area. The buildings were bombed out, the windows shattered.

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"This used to be a Melida neighborhood," Wehutti explained. "Now the Daan control it, but no one will live here. Too close to Melida territory."

They hurried down the street. Ahead was a tall fence with two deflection towers flanking it. Cannons were trained at the street ahead.

"Don't worry," Wehutti said. "The guards know me."

They walked past the checkpoint with Wehutti giving a casual wave to the guards. They saluted him respectfully. Obi-Wan noted that they were older, possibly in their sixties. They seemed old to be guards.

Once in Melida territory, Obi-Wan tried to relax, but his nerves were still jumping. He felt just as apprehensive as he had in Daan territory. Maybe it was the severe disturbances he could feel in the Force. Qui-Gon strode by his side, his face impassive, but Obi-Wan knew his Master was alert and watchful.

Barricades and checkpoints were set up at almost every block. He could see the evidence of battles fought here: blaster and grenade blasts pockmarked the buildings, and many were in ruins. Everyone he saw on the streets carried weapons in plain view. It was like the planets he'd heard about in the far reaches of the galaxy, where no laws were followed.

"We noticed other Halls of Evidence as we flew over Melida/Daan," Qui-Gon remarked to Wehutti.

"We call our world Melida," Wehutti corrected Qui-Gon in a friendly way. "We do not link our great tradition to that of the filthy Daan. Yes, even the Daan have Halls of Evidence. Evidence of their lies, we say. We Melida visit our ancestors every week to hear their stories. We bring our children so we keep alive the history of injustices the Melida have suffered at the hands of the Daan. Nobody forgets. Nobody will ever forget."

Obi-Wan felt a chill at Wehutti's grim words. Even if the Daan were as bad as he said, how could they continue to wage battle after battle when they were destroying their world piece by piece? He could see that Zehava had once been a beautiful city.

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Now it was a ruin. By building these enormous Halls of Evidence, were they keeping history alive, or destroying their civilization?

And there was something else that was wrong here, Obi-Wan thought. Something that hovered at the back of his mind, something he couldn't quite place.

Obi-Wan's gaze moved absently down the street to a group of Melidas sitting outside at a cafe. The window of the restaurant had been blown out, and a fire had destroyed the interior, but the owner had set out tables and chairs on the walkway outside. A few tubs of blooming plants with bright red flowers struggled to add a cheerful note next to the bomb-blasted building.

Suddenly, Obi-Wan realized what was wrong. He hadn't seen anyone on the streets older than twenty or younger than fifty or so. Mostly, the streets were crowded with elders and young people like himself. He had seen no men or women of Qui-Gon's age except for Wehutti. Even the other snipers had been elders, he realized. Were the mid-life people all working, or gathered somewhere for a meeting?

"Wehutti, where are all the middle-aged people?" Obi-Wan asked curiously.

"They're dead," Wehutti said flatly.

Even Qui-Gon looked startled. "The wars have wiped out the middle generation?"

"The *Daan* have wiped out the middle generation," Wehutti corrected grimly.

Obi-Wan had noticed the same lack of the middle generation in the Daan sector, but he didn't mention it to Wehutti. Obviously, the hatred of the Daan ran so deep in Wehutti that he could see no other sides of the story.

As they passed the blown-out cafe, Obi-Wan noticed graffiti on a partially destroyed wall. Scrawled in blazing red paint were the words THE YOUNG WILL RISE! WE ARE EVERYONE!

They turned a corner and walked through a neighborhood that had once prospered. As they made their way through the

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barricades onto once-pleasant squares, Obi-Wan noticed more graffiti. It all repeated what he'd seen on the cafe wall.

"Who are the Young?" he asked Wehutti, pointing to the graffiti. "Is it some organized group?"

Wehutti frowned. "Just kids, fooling around. It isn't enough that we have to live in Daan-destroyed homes and gardens. Our own children have to make our surroundings worse by defacing them. Ah, here we are."

He stopped in front of a once-luxurious mansion. A solid durasteel wall had been erected around it. It was topped with coils of electro-wire. The windows were barred and Obi-Wan was sure they would release an electro-charge if touched. The house was now a fortress.

Wehutti stopped in front of the gate and pressed his eye against the iris-reader. The gate clicked open and he gestured for them to go inside.

They stepped into a walled courtyard. In front of the house was a rack filled with weapons.

"I'm afraid you must leave your lightsabers here," Wehutti said apologetically. He unstrapped his own weapons from their holsters. "This is Melida headquarters. It's a weapon-free zone."

Qui-Gon hesitated a fraction. Obi-Wan waited to see what he would do. A Jedi is never separated from his or her lightsaber.

"I'm sorry, but if you break this rule the negotiations will go badly for you," Wehutti said in a conciliatory tone. "They need proof of your trust since you ask for theirs. But it is your decision."

Slowly, Qui-Gon withdrew his lightsaber. He nodded at Obi-Wan to do the same. He slipped it into the rack, then took Obi-Wan's and slipped it next to his.

Wehutti smiled. "I'm sure this will go smoothly. This way."

Qui-Gon gestured for Obi-Wan to step in first as he gathered the folds of his cloak more closely around him. Wehutti followed directly behind them.

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The hallway was dark, the stone floor pitted with holes. Wehutti led the way to a room on the left. Dark material was hung over the windows, shutting out any light. A lamp in one corner emitted a tiny glow that failed to chase away the shadows.

Obi-Wan made out a group of men and women sitting at a long table against the wall. They appeared to be waiting for them.

"The Melida Council," Wehutti explained to them in a whisper. "They rule the Melida people." He closed the heavy door behind them with a clang. Obi-Wan heard a lock spring. He glanced at Qui-Gon, trying to read if his Master felt the same jolt of apprehension.

"I have returned, comrades," Wehutti announced. He spread his arms to indicate Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon. "And I have brought two more Jedi hostages for our grand cause!"

Chapter Six

Wehutti had barely finished speaking when Qui-Gon moved. His lightsaber was activated and in his hand while the smile still beamed on Wehutti's face. Qui-Gon whirled, striking Wehutti on the shoulder. At the same time, he tossed Obi-Wan's lightsaber to him, hoping the boy was prepared to catch it.

Qui-Gon had been ready for Wehutti's betrayal. He did not need the Force to tell him that Wehutti had led them into a trap. His instincts had told him so before they had even reached the gates of the Inner Hub. When Wehutti had asked them to leave their weapons, Qui-Gon had only feigned his hesitation. He had foreseen the request and was already planning to get around it. It had been easy to unfurl his cloak to cover his recapture of the lightsabers. Even clever men can see only what they want to see. Wehutti had already been congratulating himself on his own ingenuity in luring the Jedi into his trap.

Wehutti fell with a cry of rage and pain. Obi-Wan activated his lightsaber.

"The door," Qui-Gon said to him, and prepared to defend himself against the group seated at the table. Several had half-risen, but the remaining Melida were still too shocked to react.

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He heard Obi-Wan strike a blow to the lock. Two warriors, a man and a woman, had been quicker to react than the others. They started toward Qui-Gon, blasters in hand.

Suddenly, a light blazed on. Obi-Wan must have activated the lighting while he struggled with the door. It was better not to fight in the dark, though every Jedi is trained to be able to do so.

Qui-Gon suppressed a start of surprise when the Melida soldiers were fully revealed. All of them had already been severely wounded. He saw evidence of synth-flesh covering faces and exposed skin, as well as plastoid limbs. Two of the group wore breath-masks.

The Melida and the Daan were truly destroying each other, piece by piece.

This was only a fleeting thought, gone as quickly as it had come. Qui-Gon knew he must concentrate on the threat. He deflected the blaster fire as he ran to Obi-Wan, who had easily melted the lock. The door stood open. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon raced from the room into the corridor.

Pounding footsteps overhead made them pause. A red light blinked insistently on the wall. Bars suddenly slammed down over the front door.

"Someone triggered a silent alarm," Qui-Gon said.

"We'll never get out that door," Obi-Wan warned.

They turned toward the hallway, racing to find a back exit. They knew they had little time before the rest of the Melida soldiers found them.

As they passed various points in the hallway, an electronic beep sounded.

"Those are location sensors," Qui-Gon said. "They're tracking us. They know exactly where we are."

At the end of the hallway they came to a heavily fortified door. Qui-Gon turned to the left and opened the first door he saw. They would have to get out a window if they could.

The room was high-ceilinged and full of stored equipment: circuits, nav-computers, sensor parts, dismantled droids. Qui-

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Gon crossed to the window. Electro-bars ran in a grid over the pane. The security device would keep out life-forms and resist some forms of weaponry. But it was no match for a Jedi lightsaber. Qui-Gon cut through the bars with one swipe, leaving a gap big enough for them to leap through. Then he did the same with the window pane.

"Go on, Padawan," he urged Obi-Wan.

The boy leaped easily through the gap. Qui-Gon followed. They found themselves in a walled and fortified courtyard. The wall would be easily scaled, Qui-Gon calculated. Too easily.

"Come on, Qui-Gon," Obi-Wan said impatiently.

"Wait." Qui-Gon walked closer to the wall. He crouched down and studied it. "It's mined," he told Obi-Wan. "Thermal detonators. If we climb it or even leap over it, the infrared sensors will blow us sky-high."

"So we're trapped."

"I'm afraid so," Qui-Gon answered, his mind sifting through the possibilities. They would have to reenter the Melida fortress and fight their way out. They didn't have much time. The soldiers would figure out where they were in seconds.

Qui-Gon whirled, his lightsaber raised, as he heard a metallic scraping sound. But no Melida warrior was in sight. He tracked the sound to the floor. A small sewer grate was being pushed back.

A small, dirty hand shot out of the opening and beckoned.

Obi-Wan looked at Qui-Gon, puzzled. "What should we do?" he whispered.

An ironic voice floated up from the grate. "Go ahead, talkdroids. Have a debate. I'll wait. We have plenty of time."

Qui-Gon heard shouting and running in the fortress. Any moment now, soldiers would appear at the window.

"Let's go," he told Obi-Wan.

He waited while his Padawan slithered into the opening. Qui-Gon followed blindly, his feet searching and finding the rung of a

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ladder leading downward. Hoping he hadn't made a mistake, Qui-Gon climbed down.

Chapter Seven

Obi-Wan felt his way down the rickety metal ladder. He stepped off the last rung into ankle-deep water. Qui-Gon followed, moving with his usual grace, surprising for such a large man.

It was impossible to tell if their rescuer was a boy or a girl. The figure wore a hooded tunic, and pressed a dirty finger against its lips. Then he or she raised a finger and pointed above. The meaning was clear. If they weren't absolutely quiet, the guards above would hear.

The footsteps above were loud, the voices angry and insistent. The Jedi's rescuer turned and walked very slowly through the water, raising one foot and slipping it carefully back into the water so that no splash was heard. Obi-Wan followed the example. Softly, quietly, they moved farther down the tunnel.

The walls were shored up with splintered beams. Obi-Wan eyed them uneasily. The tunnel did not seem very secure to him. Still, it was an improvement over fighting his way out of a heavily armed fortress.

As soon as they had put some distance between themselves and the entrance, they picked up their pace. They walked through what felt like miles of tunnel, slogging through water and muck. Occasionally, the water was up to their knees. Their rescuer led

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them through old sewer tunnels, and the smell was terrible. Obi-Wan tried not to gag. Their rescuer seemed not to notice it, but kept up the same dogged, determined pace.

At last they came to a large vaulted space illuminated by several glow rods mounted on the walls. The ground was dry here, the air noticeably fresher. The room was dotted with rectangular stone boxes overgrown with moss. More lined the walls.

"Tombs," Qui-Gon murmured. "It's an old resting ground."

One of the tombs, scraped clean of moss, gave off a pale white gleam in the darkness. Stools were drawn up around it. A group of young boys and girls - some the same age as Obi-Wan, some younger - sat eating from bowls at the makeshift table.

A tall boy with close-cropped dark hair noticed their entrance. He stood. "I found them," their rescuer announced.

The boy nodded. "Welcome, Jedi," he said solemnly. "We are the Young."

Around them, the walls seemed to move. Shapes took form and became boys and girls, appearing out of the shadows and from behind the tombs to gather around Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon.

Startled, Obi-Wan gazed around at their faces. Most of them were thin and dressed in rags. All wore makeshift weapons tied onto belts or shoulder holsters. They gazed at him curiously, without any attempt to be polite.

The tall boy moved forward. He wore a battered chestplate of plastoid armor. "I am Nield. I lead the Young. This is Cerasi."

Their rescuer threw back the hood, and Obi-Wan saw that she was a girl of about his age. Her copper hair was cut short and ragged. She had a small face with a pointed chin. Her pale green eyes were like crystals, glittering even in the dark vault.

"Thank you for rescuing us," Qui-Gon said. "Now, can you tell us why you did?"

"You would have been a pawn in the game of war," Nield said with a shrug. "We prefer that the game be over."

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"I saw graffiti on walls about the Young," Obi-Wan said. "Are you Melida or Daan?"

Cerasi shook her head. "We are everyone," she said, lifting her chin proudly.

"And you want the war to stop?" Qui-Gon asked.

"There is a cease-fire," Obi-Wan pointed out.

Nield waved his hand. "The war will start again. Tomorrow, next week - it always does. Even the oldest among the elders don't remember what the original grievance was. They don't remember why the war began. They only remember the battles. They keep archives and go once a week to remind each other of the blood that has been spilled. They used to make us go, too."

"The Halls of Evidence," Obi-Wan said, nodding.

"Yes, they pour money into those halls while the cities decay around us," Nield said contemptuously. "While the children starve and the ill die for lack of med supplies. Both Melida and Daan use up huge tracts of land while there is no land left to farm, no land left that has not been scarred by war or taken up by the preparation for more war."

"Yet they go on fighting," Cerasi put in. "The hatred never stops."

"And who do our glorious leaders defend?" Nield asked. "Only the dead." He gestured at the tombs. "The dead are everywhere on Melida/Daan. We have no spaces left to put them. This is an old burial ground, and there are many others above us. The Young are for the living. It is up to us to take back the planet. The middle generation is gone - our parents are dead. Any who are left have joined with the elders to keep on fighting. Right now the tactics are sniping and sabotage, since most of the weaponry and ammunition were depleted in the last great battle."

"There are hardly any starfighters left," Cerasi told them. "Both the Melida and the Daan are pouring whatever money they have into factories to make more weapons. They are forcing children to work in them. They are forcing anyone over fourteen

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to join the army. That's why we came underground. It was either this or die."

Obi-Wan gazed around the vault at the faces of the boys and girls around him. From what he had seen in his short time on the planet, he knew that Nield and Cerasi were right. The elders were destroying the planet. The time-honored moral law of improving a world for future generations did not hold here. Even children were sacrificed to hatred. Obi-Wan admired them for fighting back.

"That's why we saved you from Wehutti," Nield explained. "The War Council was planning to use the two of you as hostages to force the Jedi Council to back a Melida government. They hoped to force you to speak on their behalf in the Senate on Coruscant."

"Then he does not know the Jedi," Qui-Gon remarked.

A slender boy spoke up. "He doesn't know anything," he said in a joking tone. "He's a Melida."

Nield sprang forward like a shot from a blaster rifle. He wrapped two hands around the boy's neck and picked him up off the floor. The boy's feet flailed out as Nield squeezed his throat. The boy's eyes widened in a desperate plea. He let out an anguished croaking noise, trying to get air into his lungs. Nield squeezed harder.

Qui-Gon took a step forward, but at that moment Nield loosened his grip. The boy fell to the floor, gasping.

"No talk like that here," Nield said. "*Ever*. We are everyone. Towan, you'll sleep for three days in Drain Two for that."

The boy nodded, his hands on his throat protectively, trying to gasp in air. No one looked at him as he slinked to the back of the group and disappeared into the shadows.

"We will help you locate Tahl," Nield said, calmly returning to the conversation as though nothing had happened. "But you must help us, too."

Obi-Wan had to stop himself from crying out, *Of course we will help you!* It was up to his Master to do that. Never in any mission

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had he met a cause that seemed so just. They had been sent here to rescue Tahl, but surely if they could continue her mission as guardian of peace they should do so. It was in the galaxy's best interest to stabilize the planet. Nield was offering them a chance to do this as well as their primary mission. He waited for Qui-Gon to speak. All the faces in the vault turned expectantly to the tall, rugged Jedi Knight.

"We have spoken to the Melida," Qui-Gon said cautiously. "We have spoken to you. But we have not received a complete picture of what goes on here. I cannot promise you help until I have seen something of the Daan."

It took a moment for Qui-Gon's words to sink in. Then Nield's face flushed with anger. "You want to see something of the Daan?" he asked challengingly. "I am a Daan. Come with me. I'll show you that the Daan are no better than the Melida. And no worse."

Chapter Eight

Cerasi led the way through the tunnels again, away from the direction they had come in, straight into Daan territory.

"Cerasi knows every step of these tunnels," Nield explained as they followed behind her. His earlier anger had passed as quickly as it had come. "She was the first to come down here to live."

"Why did she leave her life above ground?" Qui-Gon asked.

"She saw the way things are, as I did," Nield answered. "There is no life for us up there. Down here we have muck and filth, but we have hope." His teeth gleamed in the darkness as he smiled. "It may seem strange to you, but we're happier here."

"It's not strange at all," Obi-Wan said.

"Was it the Young who shored up the tunnels?" Qui-Gon asked. "The work seems recent."

Nield nodded before squeezing through a small opening, then waited for them to enter the new tunnel. "We did it bit by bit, piece by piece. The tunnels were built during the Eighteenth Battle of Zehava. The Daan expanded the water and sewage tunnels and broke through into the underground burial vaults from the Tenth War, working secretly at night to enter the Melida sector. That's when the city was divided between north and south. They won that battle."

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"And then the Nineteenth Battle of Zehava was fought barely six months later," Cerasi said, overhearing them. "The battles never stop. They never will, unless we act."

Cerasi paused. Light filtered down from a crack in the stone overhead. "Here."

Qui-Gon eyed the curved ceiling of the tunnel. "Where?"

Cerasi unclipped a ring of tension cord from her belt. She expertly tossed the cord above and, with a flicking motion of her wrist, wrapped it around a hook embedded in the mortar of the ceiling. Cerasi tested it, then glanced at Qui-Gon and flashed him a grin. "Don't worry, it will even hold *you*."

She scrambled up the cord, hand over hand.

When she had almost reached the top, she swung out from the cord and hooked her fingers into the crack in the stone. She remained there, pressing her face against the crack.

"All clear," she called down softly. She pushed off and swung hard, tilting her body back until she was almost upside down. Using her momentum, she kicked at the stone with her feet. It dislodged, and with her next swing, she gave it a more gentle kick to move it out of the way. Qui-Gon heard a thud as the stone hit the ground overhead. On her next swing, Cerasi easily hooked her feet into the opening, then bent her body to swing herself out.

The whole operation had taken maybe thirty seconds. Qui-Gon admired Cerasi's agility and strength.

She popped her head back down. "Nothing to it."

One by one, the remaining three pulled themselves up the cord and then swung out of the opening. They were not quite as graceful and swift as Cerasi, but they made it.

Qui-Gon found himself in a storeroom located in a service building in back of an abandoned estate. It was a clever place to hide an entrance to the tunnels.

Now Nield led the way, since he was familiar with the Daan sector. "Don't worry," he told the Jedi. "I'm a Daan, and many

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know me here. You're safer in Daan territory. At least the Daan don't want to take you hostage."

Now that Qui-Gon had more time, he was able to study the Daan sector more closely. It didn't seem that much different than the Inner Hub. Abandoned, bombed-out buildings. Barricades. Food shortages in the shops. And everywhere people going about their daily lives with old and ragged weapons strapped to chests, hips, and ankles. He did not see many faces younger than sixty or older than twenty.

"This used to be a beautiful city," Nield remarked, sadness in his voice. "I've seen drawings and hologram recreations. It's been completely rebuilt seven times. When I was very young, I remember trees and blossoms and even a museum that had nothing to do with the dead."

"There were no barricades for five years," Cerasi said softly. "Daans and Melidas mixed in both sectors. In some neighborhoods they even lived side by side. Then the Twenty-Fifth Battle of Zehava began."

"What about your parents, Cerasi?" Obi-Wan asked.

Cerasi's expression was hard for Qui-Gon to read. She seemed to struggle with the decision to share even a part of her story. "Their hatred destroyed them, like so many others. My mother died while conducting a sniper raid. My brother was sent to the country to work in a munitions factory, I have not heard a word from him since."

"And your father?"

Cerasi's face smoothed out, became bland. "He is dead," she said colorlessly.

A story there, Qui-Gon thought. Each of the Young, he realized, would have a similar one, full of sorrow and tragedy, of parents lost too soon, families fractured. That was the bond between them.

Ahead, Qui-Gon saw a glimpse of blue water. They walked down a wide boulevard, leaping over large holes where proton torpedoes had fallen.

Jude Watson

"This is Lake Weir," Nield said. "I used to come swimming here when I was little. Now you'll see what the Daan have done."

As they drew closer, the patch of blue Qui-Gon had glimpsed between two buildings widened, and he could see that the lake was quite large. It would have been a beautiful expanse, except for the low, massive ebony stone building that floated slightly above the water by repulsor-posts.

"Another Hall of Evidence," Nield said, disgusted. "This was the last remaining body of water within a thousand kilometers. Now no one can enjoy it but the dead."

The wind ruffled Nield's hair as he gazed at the scene. His disgusted look softened to one of sadness, and Qui-Gon imagined that a memory of one of those swim& had surfaced. He was suddenly struck by how young Nield looked. Underground, his manner had made him seem older than Obi-Wan, but they were about the same age.

Qui-Gon gave a quick glance at Cerasi. Her slender, pretty face was pale, almost drawn, but he could still see the young child she'd once been. They were all so young, he thought in sorrow. Too young for the task they'd set themselves - to right centuries of wrong, to save a world cracked by tension and strife.

"Come," Nield said. "Let's see the happy dead speak."

He strode forward and they followed. He entered the stone door and walked quickly down the aisles, past monument after monument. He activated hologram after hologram but did not stop to hear their tales. Their voices filled the huge chamber, echoing with their stories of revenge and hatred. Nield began to run, pressing globe after globe to activate the ghosts.

Finally, he stopped in front of the last hologram he'd activated. It was a tall man with shoulder-length hair, wearing armor.

"I am Micae, son of Terandi of Garth, from the North Country," the hologram said. "I was but a boy when the Melida invaded Garth and herded my people into camps. There, many died, including -"

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"And why did the Melida do that, you fool?" Nield mocked the figure, drowning out the list of the dead. "Perhaps because the Daan soldiers in the North Country attacked the Melida settlements without warning, killing hundreds?"

The warrior's tale went on. "- and my mother died that day without ever being reunited with my father. My father died in the great Battle of the Plains, avenging the great wrong of the Melida during the Battle of the North -"

"-Which had taken place a century before!" Nield scoffed.

"- and today I go to battle with my three sons. My youngest son is too young to join us. I fight today so that he may never have to fight -"

"Fat chance!" Nield jeered.

"We seek justice, not vengeance. And that is why I know we shall triumph." The warrior raised his fist, then opened it in a gesture of peace.

"Liars and fools!" Nield shouted. He turned abruptly away from the hologram. "Let's get out of here. I can't bear their stupid voices any more."

They walked out into the open air. Gray clouds were massing overhead, and the water looked almost as black as the great hall that floated above it, casting a long shadow. It was hard to tell where the building ended and the water began.

"Do you see?" Nield demanded of Qui-Gon. "They will never stop. The Young are this world's only hope. I know the Jedi are wise. You must see that our cause is just. Don't we deserve a chance?"

Nield's golden eyes burned with fervor. Qui-Gon glanced at Obi-Wan. He saw that the boy had been not only moved by Nield's words, but deeply stirred.

That made him uneasy. Though a Jedi's heart could be touched, it was his duty to remain unbiased and calm. The situation here was complicated and volatile. They would need clear heads to navigate it. His instinct told him it was better not to take sides.

Jude Watson

But there was the question of Tahl. Rescue was their primary mission. Nield had promised his help. Could he deliver on his promise?

"I know where Tahl is being held," Nield said, almost as though he'd read Qui-Gon's mind. "She is alive."

"You can get us to this place?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Cerasi can," Nield said. "It is heavily guarded. But I have a plan to take care of that. While you are rescuing Tahl, the Young will launch a surprise attack."

"I am not sure how surprising an attack would be, given that the Melida know that the Jedi are on the loose," Qui-Gon said. "They will be expecting it."

"But they will not be expecting a *Daan* attack."

"Are the Daan planning to attack?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No," Nield answered. "But that doesn't mean the Melida can't *think* they are. Our plan is to stage diversionary attacks in both the Melida and Daan sectors. The Melida will think that the Daan are attacking and send their forces out into the streets to defend themselves. The Daan will do the same. I promise you confusion and chaos. Then you can go after Tahl."

"But you have no weapons," Obi-Wan said. "How do you expect to attack?"

"We have a plan," Nield said mysteriously. "All we ask of you is to stay in the vault and not contact the Melida. Right now they are searching for you everywhere. It is better that their forces be busy with that chore so that we can do our work."

"So you see how easy we're making this for you?" Cerasi asked. "All we ask is that you do nothing."

"We'll take care of the diversion," Nield continued. "You take care of Tahl. I also know that her wounds were severe. She needs medical attention."

Annoyed, Qui-Gon gazed out at the water to buy time. He knew Nield was blackmailing him, forcing him to bend to his wishes so that Qui-Gon could fulfill his mission. He had been out-maneuvered by a child.

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And Obi-Wan, he saw, was enjoying it. Another curl of apprehension registered along his spine.

He turned back to Nield and Cerasi. "All right," he said. "Obi-Wan and I will wait for you to bring us to Tahl. Our primary objective is her rescue. After that, you're on your own. Is that good enough?"

Nield grinned. "It is all we need."

Chapter Nine

Back at the tunnel, preparations began. Nield and Cerasi huddled with the rest of the Young, deep in conversation. Obi-Wan sat quietly at the table, watching them. The determination on their faces told him that whatever the outcome, the Daan and the Melida were both in for a big surprise at dawn the next day.

Qui-Gon paced on the other side of the room, displaying a rare show of impatience.

"If you need help with strategy-" he began.

Cerasi turned. "No," she said curtly. "We don't need any help."

"Another opinion can only strengthen your odds," Qui-Gon said quietly.

This time, Cerasi didn't bother to turn. Nield did not even look up.

"We do not *want* your help, Jedi," Cerasi said, even more sharply than before.

Obi-Wan glanced at Qui-Gon to gauge his reaction. He saw his Master struggle with his irritation. But although Qui-Gon could be impulsive, he was never petty. The irritation left him, and his usual mask of calm returned.

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"Padawan, I am going to explore the tunnels," he told Obi-Wan in a low voice. "It is better not to rely totally on the Young to guide us. You remain here."

Obi-Wan nodded. For once, he didn't want to accompany Qui-Gon. He wanted to stay and watch the Young plan the battle.

Cerasi divided the young people into teams and assigned them tasks. They worked on makeshift weapons fashioned from scraps. Their most prominent weapon was a powerful slingshot that threw laserballs. The balls could only sting a life-form if they connected, but if they hit a hard object, they made a sound like blaster fire.

Over the course of the afternoon, Obi-Wan tried to grow used to the muffled sound of explosions. War toys were part of the childhood of both Melida and Daan. The Young were modifying them to amplify their sound effects. They worked in the rooms branching off the main tunnel on missile tubes, packing them with pebbles and paint.

Cerasi worked on a pile of slingshots in a corner, honing them with a sharp knife and testing their accuracy with wadded up flimsiplast. The flimsiplast winged across the high space, hitting the same stone block with deadly accuracy. Cerasi worked tirelessly, without a break.

"I'd like to help," Obi-Wan said, approaching her. "Not with strategy," he added quickly. "I know you have that under control. But I *can* help with this."

Cerasi pushed a lock of hair from her eyes and smiled slightly. "I guess I was hard on your Boss-Master, huh?"

"He's not my boss, really," Obi-Wan said. "That's not the Jedi way. He's more of a guide."

"Sure, whatever you say. But if you ask me, elders always think they know best. They just get in the way." She handed a knife to Obi-Wan. "If you can hone it to the same thickness as the ones I did, we could get these done in a flash."

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan sat and began to scrape the knife against the supple wood. "What do you think our chances of success are tomorrow?"

"Excellent," Cerasi said firmly. "We're relying on the hatred of the two sectors. All we need to do is create the *illusion* of battle. Both sides will react without bothering to verify reports of blaster fire and torpedo launches. They expect warfare at any moment."

"Your battle may be an illusion, but the danger is not," Obi-Wan pointed out. "Both sides will have real weapons to fire."

Cerasi shook her head. "I'm not afraid."

"Awareness of fear can protect you if it does not overtake you," Obi-Wan replied.

Cerasi snorted. "Is that one of your Boss-Master's Jedi sayings?"

Obi-Wan flushed. "Yes. And I have found it to be true. Awareness of fear is an instinct that warns you to be careful. Anyone going into battle who says they are not afraid is a fool."

"Well, call me a fool, Pada-Jedi," Cerasi said flatly. "I'm not afraid."

"Ah," Obi-Wan said lightly. "You go into glorious battle without fear, confident that your filthy enemy will collapse."

He was repeating the vain boasts of the dead in the Halls of Evidence, and Cerasi knew it. She flushed as Obi-Wan had a moment before.

"More Jedi wisdom. It's a wonder you manage to survive this long, if you keep pointing out what foolish things people say," Cerasi finally said with a half smile. "Okay, I get your point. I'm no better than my ancestors, marching blindly into a battle I will lose."

"I'm not saying you will lose."

Cerasi paused, fully seeing Obi-Wan for the first time. "Well, maybe I'll feel afraid on the day of the battle. But today I feel ready. This is the first step toward justice. I can't wait to take it. Do you have any wisdom about that?"

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"No," Obi-Wan admitted. Cerasi was unlike anyone he'd ever met before. "Justice is something to fight for. If I didn't believe that, I wouldn't be a Jedi."

Cerasi put down her slingshot. "Being a Jedi is as much a part of you as being part of the Young is to me," she observed, her crystal green eyes studying him. "I guess the difference is that the Young don't have any guides. We guide ourselves."

"Being an apprentice is a journey that is an honor to undertake," Obi-Wan replied. But he feared his words were weak. He was used to saying them and believing them with his whole heart. Being a Jedi was at the core of him. But in just a few hours with the Young, he had seen a commitment that had confused him as much as it had stirred him.

Of course, he had seen deep commitment at the Temple among the Jedi students. But with some students, there often seemed to be pride mixed in. They were the elite, picked out of millions to be trained.

Whenever Yoda saw pride in a Jedi student, he found ways to expose it and put the student on the right path. Pride was often based in arrogance, and had no place in a Jedi. Part of the Jedi training was to eliminate pride and substitute sureness and humility. The Force only flourished in those who knew they were connected to all life-forms.

Here in the tunnels, Obi-Wan saw a pureness he had only glimpsed in his talks with Yoda, or his observance of Qui-Gon. That pureness was in people his own age. They did not have to strive for it. They possessed it. Perhaps because the cause they believed in was more than a concept in their minds. It was bred in their blood and bones, born in their suffering.

He felt defensive, as though Cerasi had attacked his dedication to the Jedi way. "Nield is the leader of the Young," he pointed out. "So you, too, have a boss."

"Nield is the best at strategy," Cerasi said. "If we didn't have someone to organize us, we would fall apart."

Jude Watson

"And someone to punish you?" Obi-Wan asked, remembering how Nield had almost strangled a boy.

Cerasi hesitated. Her voice softened as she continued. "Nield may seem harsh to you, but he has to be. Hatred was taught to us before we could walk. We have to be firm to stamp it out. Our vision of a new world can only survive if our hatred dies. We must forget everything we were taught. We must begin again. Nield knows this better than anyone. Perhaps because he's had it harder than any of us here."

"In what way?" Obi-Wan asked.

Cerasi sighed. She put down the slingshot she'd been working on. "That last hologram he triggered - the one he mocked - was Nield's father. He went into battle with Nield's three brothers. They all died. Nield was five years old. One month later his mother made preparations to be part of the next great battle. She left him with a cousin, a young girl who was more like a sister to him. His mother went off to fight, and she was killed, too. Then the Melida invaded his village. His cousin escaped and took him to Zehava. He had a few peaceful years, but then the Daan attacked the Melida sector, and his cousin had to fight. She was seventeen, old enough then. She died, too. Nield was left on the streets to fend for himself. He was eight years old. There were those who tried to care for him. He wouldn't live with anyone, but he did take shelter and food when he needed it. He didn't want to depend on anyone ever again. Can you blame him?"

Obi-Wan pictured all those people who loved Nield - all of them dying, one after the other. "No," he said softly. "I don't blame him at all."

Cerasi sighed. "The point is, I was raised to think of the Daan as beasts, barely human. Nield was the first Daan I knew. He was the one who united both the Daan and the Melida orphans. He walked into the care centers and gathered them up, promised them freedom and peace. Then he made sure they had it. If they had stayed in the care center, eventually they'd be taken in a sweep."

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"A sweep?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Both Melida and Daan rely on the orphaned children for factory work or conscription, if they're old enough," Cerasi said flatly. "They either work or fight. It's easy to find them in the city care centers. In the towns and villages, the children just run away."

"Where do they go?"

Cerasi frowned. "They live off the land and scavenge. There are whole tribes of children beyond the city's walls. Nield has worked hard to organize them, too. They keep in contact with stolen comlinks. They don't want any more war." Cerasi turned to him. "So you ask me what our chances of success will be, and I know I answered you. But truly, I can't even think of chances or odds. We will succeed because we have to. Our world is becoming a wasteland, Obi-Wan. Only we can stop it."

Obi-Wan nodded. He felt himself beginning to understand Cerasi. He saw that her brusque-ness masked deep feeling.

"We could use your help, though," Cerasi went on. "You have ties to the Jedi Council, and they have ties to Coruscant. You can show the entire galaxy that our cause is just. Jedi support means everything."

"Cerasi, I can't promise you Jedi support," Obi-Wan said quietly. Surprising himself, he put his hand over hers. "I can only promise you mine."

Her bright gaze held his. "Why don't you come with Nield and me tomorrow? We're doing the first raid into Daan territory."

Obi-Wan hesitated. As a Jedi apprentice, he would be breaking the rules if he agreed without asking Qui-Gon's permission. But if he asked, Qui-Gon would most likely refuse.

He had already broken the rules by pledging his own support to Cerasi and her cause. That promise could conflict with the Jedi mission.

But he couldn't help himself. The cause of the Young spoke directly and urgently to his heart. As a Jedi, he didn't fight for his

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own family, his own world, or his own people. He fought for what Yoda and the Council - and Qui-Gon - decided he should fight for.

Cerasi and Nield had defined their own struggle. Obi-Wan was struck with a pang of deep envy for them. He had spent so much time with those older than himself. He had listened so often to their wisdom. Now he felt welcomed back into something different. He could be a part of a community here - he hadn't realized how much he missed a community of boys and girls his own age.

Cerasi's hand felt warm beneath his own. Her fingers were slender and delicate. Suddenly they intertwined with his and squeezed, and he felt their strength.

"Will you come?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "I will."

Chapter Ten

That night, the Young rolled sleeping quilts onto the tombs. Qui-Gon found an open space near one of the adjacent tunnel entrances, where the air was fresh.

Obi-Wan approached him awkwardly. "Nield and Cerasi have asked me to share their quarters," he said. "They watch over the youngest children."

Qui-Gon gave him a questioning look, but he nodded. "Sleep well, Padawan."

Obi-Wan picked up a sleeping quilt and returned to Nield and Cerasi.

They slept in a small anteroom off the vault. Nield put a finger to his lips as Obi-Wan entered.

"The children are asleep," he whispered. "We should be sleeping as well. We'll need all our rest for tomorrow." He put his hand on Obi-Wan's forearm. "Cerasi told me you will join us. I'm honored."

"It is my honor to help you," Obi-Wan answered.

He settled himself on the floor next to Nield and Cerasi. He thought he wouldn't be able to sleep, but the children's quiet breathing lulled him.

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It was hard to tell what time it was when he awoke. Cerasi rose from her sleeping area and leaned over Nield to touch his shoulder. Nield was already awake and stood immediately.

Obi-Wan stood as well. He was ready. He was acting not as a Jedi, but as a person - a friend. He grabbed his lightsaber and the slingshot Cerasi had given him the night before. There was an entrance from the anteroom directly into the tunnel toward Daan. Qui-Gon wouldn't see him leave.

Obi-Wan knew he was wrong not to ask permission, but he wasn't sure how angry Qui-Gon would be when he discovered he was gone. After all, Qui-Gon himself had offered to help with strategy for the battle.

Obi-Wan was glad he'd made the decision as he joined Nield and Cerasi on the deserted streets of the Daan-controlled Outer Circle. The three moved as one unit in the chilly early morning air. They walked purposefully down the deserted streets, their soft footfalls barely making a sound. Nield and Cerasi had already decided on their first targets.

They shimmied up a pipe and climbed onto the roof of a dwelling. From here, they could see the sun, more a suggestion of gathering light than a source of radiance.

"I hate to wake everybody up," Nield said, flashing a grin.

"It's time they were out of bed anyway." Cerasi held up a toy missile tube. "I'm ready."

Obi-Wan had clipped various projectiles onto his belt. He stuffed one into the missile tube. The projectiles had been fashioned around tiny amplifiers so that the sound they made when they hit would mimic the sound of a real proton missile. Cerasi and Nield had chosen a street that would echo the sound.

"Let's go," Obi-Wan agreed.

Cerasi aimed the toy missile at the abandoned building across the street. She fired.

The loud sound of the explosion surprised them.

"Listen to that. It worked!" Nield exulted.

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He fit a laserball into his slingshot and fired at the wall across the street. The unmistakable *ping ping ping* of blaster fire erupted. Obi-Wan quickly stuffed another projectile into the tube and Cerasi shot it off. The *blam* echoed off the building fronts below.

Nield continued to shoot laserballs from his slingshot, and Obi-Wan followed suit. They shot ball after ball, reloading and firing rapidly. The sound of blaster fire echoed down the street. Someone emerged from a door across the way and looked up and down the street quickly. Nield and Obi-Wan shot a rain of laserballs into an abandoned building, where no one would see them land.

Crackcrackcrack! The laserballs hit the solid surface, making an even louder sound. The Daan quickly ducked back into the building.

"He'll sound an alert," Nield said. "We're done here. Let's go."

Jumping from building to building, they made their way to another quiet street. They repeated the procedure, then moved on. Racing now, they fired down randomly with laserballs while Cerasi shot projectiles where their explosive sound would echo the most. While they moved from block to block, they shifted barricades where they could to block any military vehicles. At checkpoints, they rained their false weapon-fire over the heads of the guards, who took defensive postures, sweeping the empty streets with infrared electrobinoculars to look for the unseen attackers.

The sun rose, and sirens began to sound over the city. Nield turned to them. The rising sun reflected red off his dark hair. "Now for military headquarters."

Excitement coursed through Obi-Wan. It was almost like a game, this ruse that Nield and Cerasi had concocted. But now the game would get serious. Hitting a military target, even with fake explosives, would be dangerous.

Nield led the way across the rooftops to the Daan military headquarters. From the roof of a building across the street, Obi-Wan could see soldiers running toward landspeeders, carrying

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blasters and torpedo launchers. Obviously, they were hurrying to investigate the many alarms that had sprung up.

"So far, so good," Cerasi breathed. "There won't be as many soldiers around."

This part would be tricky. They would not be firing at houses full of sleeping civilians. The military would react swiftly. But Nield had pointed out that if they did not convince the military that an attack had been launched, their plan wouldn't work. If the military thought they were under fire as well, they might conclude that this was not random sniper fire, but a full-scale attack.

In addition to Nield, Cerasi, and Obi-Wan, other groups of the Young should have been heading out to other Daan and Melida neighborhoods. Their attacks would be launched simultaneously with the attack on military headquarters.

They waited until the soldiers had taken off in their speeders. Two guards stood outside behind transparent armored shields. Cerasi loaded her beam tube. Obi-Wan and Nield placed laserballs in their slingshots. On the whispered count of three from Cerasi, they fired.

The laserballs hit the building, sounding like blaster fire. The projectile boomed. Already, the three had loaded and shot again, then quickly scuttled back on their hands and knees and ran to the edge of the roof to jump to the adjoining building. They fired again.

Soldiers streamed out of the building in full plastoid armor, blasters in hand. Electro-binoculars were trained on the street and buildings above. Armored plates rattled down over windows and doors. A siren blasted insistently. Soldiers began to spread out down the street. Floaters took off for air surveillance. Armored vehicles poured out from an underground holding station.

"It's time to get out of here," Cerasi said.

Stuffing the toys and slingshots into their belts, they dashed across the rooftop and quickly shimmied down a drainpipe.

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When they hit the street, they slowed their pace, trying to look like Daan teenagers out for a morning walk.

"You there! Halt!"

They froze. The voice had come from behind them. Nield had already given them identity cards, so they thought they'd be able to pass. Cerasi slipped a package out of her tunic. Obi-Wan glanced at her, puzzled. Did she have a weapon? Of course, he had his lightsaber, but he would never be able to take on the troops swarming over the streets. He would only endanger Cerasi and Nield.

They turned and saw three soldiers approaching them, blasters aimed straight at their hearts.

"Identity cards," one soldier said in a clipped tone. Quickly, the three handed them over. Nield had given Obi-Wan a disc from a Daan boy who was his age and weight. The soldiers inserted the discs into a readout machine. Obi-Wan waited for them to hand them back, but instead, the first soldier gave a look at the other two to keep them. He was still suspicious. He gave Nield, Cerasi, and Obi-Wan a hard look.

"Is there anything wrong?" Nield asked worriedly.

"What do you have there?" The first soldier pointed at Cerasi's package with his blaster.

"M-muja muffins," Cerasi stammered nervously. She held out the package. "For breakfast. We go every morning."

"Let me see." The soldier opened the top of the package. Inside, Obi-Wan saw a row of muffins wrapped in napkins.

"What's on your belts?" the other soldier asked. "Aren't you a little old for toys?"

"We're practicing for the army," Nield answered. He lifted his chin. "We can't wait to fight the filthy Melida."

"What's that?" the soldier pointed to Obi-Wan's lightsaber.

Obi-Wan held it up and activated it. "The newest toy on Gala. My grandfather sells them over on Victory Street."

The soldiers eyed it. "We never had toys like that when we were young," the first said ruefully.

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"In the next battle of Zehava, the Daan will prevail!" Obi-Wan answered, waving his lightsaber.

"We might be in the next battle of Zehava right now, so hurry along and take shelter," the third soldier said gruffly. He handed Nield back his identity card and motioned for the other soldiers to do the same. "You may be fighting with real weapons before long."

The three soldiers marched off, their corn-links crackling with reports of more attacks in the city.

"That was close," Cerasi breathed. "I'm glad I brought those muja muffins. It gave us a reason to be on the street so early."

"And I thought you brought them in case I was hungry," Obi-Wan managed to tease. His heartbeat was returning to normal. He didn't want to think about how Qui-Gon would have reacted if he had been captured by the Daan.

"That was a smart move, to activate that lightsaber and call it a toy," Nield said to Obi-Wan. "Lucky for you they were too dumb to realize you were a Jedi."

Cerasi eyed him. "I have a feeling Obi-Wan was ready to use it."

Nield grinned broadly. "I have a feeling he can save us all."

The three laughed together in relief. Obi-Wan felt a current run between himself and Cerasi and Nield. Even though he was still in danger, he had never felt so free.

Chapter Eleven

Qui-Gon sat in the shadows, watching the furious activity of the Young as they dashed in and out of the vault for supplies, then hurried out to return to the streets above.

Something had woken him before dawn, a soft flurry of movement. He had seen Obi-Wan leave with Cerasi and Nield. He had let his Padawan go.

It would have been easy to step forward and challenge Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon's anger had surged, and he had wanted to confront the boy. Obi-Wan had no right to leave without permission. He had violated Qui-Gon's trust. It was a small violation, but it stung.

He and Obi-Wan had not yet achieved the perfect mind-communion of the Master-Padawan relationship. They had merely taken a few steps on a long journey together. They occasionally had disagreements and misunderstandings. But Obi-Wan had never deliberately concealed something from him before.

Obviously, Obi-Wan was afraid that Qui-Gon would not let him go. The boy was right; he would have forbidden it. Qui-Gon believed the Young sincerely wanted peace, but he wasn't sure if they would follow through with their good intentions if they

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gained any sort of power. He saw much anger in them. Obi-Wan saw only passion.

At last Nield, Cerasi, and Obi-Wan returned. Qui-Gon let out a slow breath of relief. He had started to worry.

"Time for phase two," Nield said as the three entered the vault. "We go for the weapon storage of both sides."

"What about Tahl?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Cerasi will lead you to Tahl," Nield said. "Deila?"

A tall, slender girl paused as she loaded more projectiles into pouches that hung from her belt. "Yes?"

"How's it going on the Melida side?"

She grinned. "Chaos. They think the Daan are everywhere, even in their closets."

"Good." Nield turned back to Qui-Gon. "There should be enough confusion for you to slip through. Cerasi will bring you, but you'll have to rescue Tahl on your own."

"That's fine," Qui-Gon agreed. He didn't want to put the girl in danger.

Obi-Wan didn't meet his Master's gaze as the two Jedi followed Cerasi into a narrow tunnel that led off the vault. Qui-Gon pushed his anger aside. He would not confront Obi-Wan about sneaking out. Not yet. He turned his mind to the task ahead. He had to focus on Tahl now.

Cerasi led them through a maze of tunnels until they came to a grate. Pale gray light filtered down.

"We are underneath the building where Tahl is being held," she whispered. "This will lead you to a lower level of a military barracks. Tahl is being held in a room three doors to the right. There will be guards there, but probably not as many as there were before. Every soldier is needed on the streets."

"How many were there before?" Qui-Gon asked in a low murmur.

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"That's the bad news," Cerasi said ruefully. "She's guarded by only two guards, but right around the corner is the main quarters for soldiers. It's where they come to eat and sleep. So there are always plenty of soldiers walking back and forth. That's why Nield and I figured you needed a diversion." She pointed overhead. "The grate leads directly into a grain storage area, so you can climb up without being seen."

"Thank you, Cerasi," Qui-Gon said quietly. "We can find our own way back."

But when Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan emerged into a small storage area crowded with sacks of grain, Cerasi's head popped up out of the grate after them.

"I thought you were going back," Obi-Wan whispered.

She grinned. "I have a feeling you'll need my help." She dangled her slingshot. "A diversion might come in handy."

Obi-Wan returned her grin, but Qui-Gon frowned. "I don't want to put you in danger, Cerasi. This is not part of our deal. Nield said -"

"I make my own decisions, Qui-Gon," Cerasi interrupted. "I'm offering my help. I know the layout. Will you accept my offer or not?" Cerasi's chin stuck out challengingly. Her crystal eyes glinted at Qui-Gon.

"All right," he said. "But if Obi-Wan and I get in trouble, you leave. Do you promise me?"

"I promise," Cerasi agreed.

Qui-Gon eased the door open a crack and surveyed the area. A long hallway was lined with heavy metal doors. One soldier hurried down the hall and disappeared around a turning. Two soldiers were posted as guards outside one of the doors. It was where Tahl was being held.

A soldier headed toward him, moving fast. Qui-Gon faded back, but kept close to the opening.

"Going back out there?" one of the guards asked.

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"We've got an invasion on our hands," the soldier said curtly. "Just got news of an attack only two blocks away. I've got to find my unit."

The guards exchanged nervous glances. "We're sitting ducks in here," the first one muttered. "We should be out there fighting. This duty is a waste of time anyway. I don't care if she is a Jedi, she's too weak to be a threat."

"She's done for," the other guard said. "It won't be long."

Rage and pain rose in Qui-Gon. It couldn't be too late. He controlled the anger and called on the Force to help him. He knew Obi-Wan was doing the same, for the Force was suddenly a presence in the room, surging around them.

"Qui-Gon," Cerasi whispered. "I have an idea. Will you listen?"

"Do I have a choice?" Qui-Gon responded.

Cerasi moved closer and whispered her plan in his ear.

"All right," he said. "But then you leave. Agreed?"

Cerasi nodded. Then she eased open the door and slipped out.

It took a moment for the guards to notice her.

Cerasi hurried toward them, her expression stricken.

"Halt!" the guards called.

"What?" Cerasi asked, distracted. She kept on moving.

"Halt or we'll shoot!" the guards warned.

Cerasi stopped. She wrung her hands together. "But my father is here! I have to see him!"

"Who is your father?"

Cerasi drew herself up. "Wehutti, the great hero. I must tell him that my aunt Sonie is dead. She was blown up by a foul Daan proton grenade. You must let me pass!"

"You are Wehutti's daughter?"

"Yes, look. I have an identity card." Cerasi showed the guards her Melida card.

One of the guards took it, then swiped it down his readout. When he handed it back to her, his voice was kind.

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"I haven't seen Wehutti here. He's most likely on the streets. We're being invaded, you know."

"You think I don't know that?" Cerasi cried. "The Daan are taking the Hub block by block. They'll be here any minute. I need my father! He promised he'd be here if I needed him. He promised!" Cerasi's voice wobbled. With her slight figure and her quavering voice, she seemed younger than she was.

The guards exchanged a glance. "All right. But then you've got to clear out and seek shelter," the second one said.

Cerasi hurried down the hall and turned the corner. A moment passed, then another. Qui-Gon waited patiently. He had confidence in Cerasi. She would need time to circle around to the other side of the guards.

Suddenly, the sound of blaster fire echoed down the hallway in the direction opposite from where Cerasi had disappeared. The two guards exchanged glances.

"Daan!" the first guard hissed. "The girl was right! They're attacking!"

Qui-Gon was out the door, lightsaber in hand, before the guards could turn and react. Obi-Wan raced alongside him.

The guards fired their blasters rapidly as soon as they saw the Jedi. But they were too late. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon deflected the fire with their lightsabers without missing a step.

Moving in synch, they jumped the last few meters to the guards, feet first. Deflecting blaster fire with their lightsabers, they hit the guards in the chest with a powerful kick. The guards flew back, their blasters flying out of their hands.

"Cover me," Qui-Gon instructed Obi-Wan crisply. He moved to the door. As he began to slice through the lock with his lightsaber, the guards recovered and reached for the electro-jabbers on their belts.

Obi-Wan didn't wait for them to rise. He leaped over them so that they would need to turn and twist to attack. He knocked the electro-jabber out of one guard's hand with a kick and sliced

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down with his lightsaber toward the other. The guard howled and dropped his weapon.

"Don't move," Obi-Wan warned them, keeping his lightsaber over their heads.

The lock gave, and Qui-Gon pushed open the door. He stopped, stricken at the heart by Tahl's appearance. She had gone through Temple training with him. She had always been beautiful, a tall woman from the planet Noori, with eyes striped gold and green and skin the color of dark honey.

Now she appeared thin and wasted. Her beautiful skin was marred by a white scar that ran from one eye and curved around her chin. The other eye was covered with a patch.

"Tahl," he said, keeping his voice steady. "It's Qui-Gon."

"Ah, rescue at last," she said in the gently mocking tone that had always made him smile. "Do I look that bad, old friend?"

He realized then that she could not see.

"You look as lovely as ever," he said. "But can you wait on the compliments? My hands are full at the moment."

"I'm afraid I'm a little weak," Tahl confessed.

"I'll carry you." Qui-Gon scooped up Tahl in his arms. She felt as light as a child. "Can you hang onto my neck?" he asked.

He felt her nod as her arms tightened around him. "Just get me out of here," she said. "I've had better food in a Hutt cantina."

Just then Qui-Gon heard the sound he'd hoped he wouldn't: rapid blaster fire. Reinforcements had arrived. Obi-Wan was in trouble. His time had run out.

He proceeded cautiously to the door. He peered out.

Six soldiers had charged out of their quarters and were shooting at Obi-Wan from the end of the hall. Obi-Wan had flung open a door and was using it for cover. The soldiers had rearmed the two on the ground, so there were now eight soldiers to fight.

"What's the bad news?" Tahl asked.

"Eight so far," Qui-Gon said. "Maybe more coming."

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"Piece of cake for you," she said weakly.

"Just what I was about to say."

Blaster fire rebounded off the door that Obi-Wan crouched behind. The doors were armored, Obi-Wan realized. They could use that to their advantage.

Qui-Gon flung his own door wide open and stepped out behind it, making a quick calculation. Obi-Wan had held off the soldiers so far by periodically deflecting blaster fire back at them with his lightsaber, but they would soon realize that he wasn't armed with a blaster.

Then they would rush him.

Qui-Gon looked over at Obi-Wan. It was time to take the offensive again. But he couldn't endanger Tahl, and she was too weak to walk. They were stuck. He would not leave Tahl. He didn't even want to put her down again. If he was separated from her, he might not be able to get to her again.

"Leave me, Qui-Gon," Tahl murmured to him. "I'll be no worse off than I was before. Do not let them capture you, too."

"Have a little faith, will you?" Qui-Gon countered gently.

Suddenly, blaster fire erupted from the opposite end of the hall. Now they were surrounded!

But after a moment Qui-Gon realized that the blaster fire was directed at the *soldiers*.

Or, he realized suddenly, at least it *sounded* like blaster fire. Cerasi hadn't left after creating a diversion, as she'd promised.

The soldiers dived around the corner for cover. Qui-Gon glanced back down the other end just in time to see Cerasi fire another laser-ball. It hit the wall, and blaster fire echoed down the hall.

The guards now fired blindly, unwilling to risk exposure by coming around the corner. Obi-Wan stepped out. He was easily able to deflect the wild shots with his lightsaber. Holding Tahl against his chest with one arm, Qui-Gon raised his lightsaber to catch any blaster fire that Obi-Wan was unable to deflect.

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Together they moved backward down the hallway toward the storage room.

As they moved, Obi-Wan flung open door after door. They swung outward, helping to block blaster fire. The soldiers kept up a steady stream of fire, but Cerasi loaded and shot laser-balls just as fast, and the soldiers were convinced they were under attack.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan reached the safety of the storage room. Cerasi dashed forward.

"Hurry," she urged. "I'm running low."

She continued shooting as Obi-Wan slid back the grate and Qui-Gon climbed down one-handed, Tahl hugging his neck.

"Now!" Obi-Wan yelled.

Cerasi hurried down after Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan followed, setting the grate back in place.

"Thank you, Cerasi." Qui-Gon spoke quietly.

"We could not have done this without your bravery."

"Obi-Wan helped us this morning," Cerasi replied carelessly, as if risking her life were nothing. "I just returned the favor."

"Why did you think of claiming to be Wehutti's daughter?" Obi-Wan asked her as she led the way back.

"Because I am," Cerasi answered.

"But you said your father was dead," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"He is dead to me," Cerasi replied with a shrug. "But occasionally he comes in handy. Just like most Elders."

She looked over her shoulder at Obi-Wan and flashed him a grin. Obi-Wan's eyes shone back.

Qui-Gon saw in the moment of their exchange that something had deepened between them. They were intimates now, communicating without words. The adventure they had shared that morning had united them.

Qui-Gon felt his earlier anger drain away. He supposed that Obi-Wan had a lonely existence at times, traveling with someone older than himself. He must miss being with boys and girls his

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own age. It was good that he could bond so strongly with another.

Why should it make Qui-Gon so uneasy?

Chapter Twelve

Qui-Gon settled Tahl into a nest of quilts and blankets, the best the Young had to offer. He stood over her for a moment. She had tired from the short battle and she fell asleep almost immediately. He could feel the flicker of her living Force, but it was only a flicker. Tahl's memory of how she got her injuries was gone. She remembered being caught in the middle of a battle, but she could not remember being wounded or blinded.

Qui-Gon sat back against the wall to think. Their mission was over.

They had only to wait until the fighting died down. Cerasi had assured him that she could get the Jedi out of the city without endangering Tahl. He would bring Tahl back to Coruscant and hope that the Jedi healing arts would bring her back to the vibrant strength he remembered so well.

Qui-Gon knew he would leave behind a world in chaos. Children battling to save it. Elders locked in conflict, willing to sacrifice the population for their cause.

Yet he must leave. His first duty was to get Tahl back. Then he would ask Yoda's permission to return. The Jedi Master would not grant it, most likely. The Jedi did not go to worlds and meddle in their affairs unless they were requested to do so. Only in extraordinary circumstances would they interfere, or if a world

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was threatening the peace and security of others. The inhabitants of Melida/Daan were locked in its conflict, hurting no other world but their own.

Obi-Wan had asked permission to go above ground with Cerasi. Qui-Gon had granted it. He knew that when he told Obi-Wan that they must leave, his Padawan would not want to go. Yet Obi-Wan would obey him. It was his first duty as a Padawan, and Obi-Wan was a Jedi to the bone.

Their mission was close to success. Yet foreboding lodged in Qui-Gon's chest like a heavy stone. His instinct was warning him, but he could not place what the warning was, or how it would affect him.

He heard running footsteps, and Nield burst into the room with Obi-Wan and Cerasi. Qui-Gon was struck with how the three moved in the same rhythm, their strides matching perfectly despite Obi-Wan's long legs and Cerasi's more slender build.

"Gather around, everyone!" Nield cried. "We have news!"

Nield leaped up on top of the grandest tomb. Boys and girls swarmed around him, coming from the strategy stations around the room and from the adjoining tunnels. They turned expectant faces up to him.

"Our battle is over," Nield said. "We have achieved total victory!"

The Young cheered wildly. Nield held up a hand.

"Our raid on the weapons storehouse of the Daan was a success. We have stolen the weapons the Daan did not waste in attacking the Melida or shooting at imaginary attackers. We have deposited them in the North Tunnel. The Melida" Nield paused, grinned, "-blew up their own storehouses so that the Daan would not get their weapons!"

The Young let out wild hoots of laughter. They shouted with joy.

"We have delivered our messages to both sides, letting them know that the Young were behind the battles, and that we have succeeded in stealing their arms. Without weapons, the Elders

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cannot fight each other. Today we have taken a giant step toward peace!"

Exhilaration raced through the room like a current. Qui-Gon watched as Nield leaned down and grabbed Cerasi's hand. He pulled her up to stand next to him. Then he reached down for Obi-Wan. Smiling, Obi-Wan leaped up on the tomb to take his place beside the two leaders.

The Young reached up to touch his tunic. Obi-Wan reached down to touch their hands and accept their congratulations. He linked arms with Cerasi and Nield. Never once did he glance at Qui-Gon. It was as though the Jedi Knight wasn't in the room. It was as though Obi-Wan was not a Jedi.

It was as though he was part of them. As though he had become one of the Young.

Chapter Thirteen

Qui-Gon left the main room and found a quiet place in an adjoining tunnel to contact Yoda. The Jedi Master appeared in miniature hologram form. Quickly, Qui-Gon filled him in on the situation and the rescue of Tahl.

Yoda passed a hand over his forehead in distress. "Relieved I am to hear this news," he said. "Concerned I am to hear that Tahl is ailing. Needs care, she does."

"I will leave as soon as she's stronger and it is safe," Qui-Gon promised. "But I leave a situation here on Melida/Daan that is volatile."

Yoda nodded several times. "Heard you, I have, Qui-Gon. But remind you I must that neither the Melida or the Daan have asked for our help. Almost sacrificed one Jedi, I did. Willing sacrifice two more, I am not."

"We could bring Tahl back and then return," Qui-Gon pointed out.

Yoda paused. "Before the Jedi Council you must go," he said finally. "Make this decision alone I cannot. Cared for, Tahl must be. Then decide we will, if help we must give. Until then, taking sides the Jedi must not do. Jeopardize peace it would. Avoid you must, angering one side or another."

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As usual, Yoda had a point. Already the Melida would be angry when they heard that the Jedi had broken into their barracks. And if word got out that Obi-Wan had gone on the raid into Daan territory, that would anger the Daan.

He bowed. "I hope to find Tahl ready tomorrow. I will return soon, Master."

"Look forward to that day, I will," Yoda said gently. The hologram flickered and disappeared.

"Go back? We can't go back!" Obi-Wan exclaimed. "We can't leave the Young now. They need us."

"We have received no official request to stabilize the planet," Qui-Gon said patiently. "Perhaps back on Coruscant, the Jedi Council will -"

"We can't wait for the Council to review this," Obi-Wan interrupted, shaking his head. "If we wait too long, the Melida and the Daan will rearm. The time to act is now."

"Obi-Wan, listen to me," Qui-Gon said sternly. "Yoda has directed us to come back. Tahl needs care."

"She needs rest and med care," Obi-Wan argued. "We can get that for her here. Cerasi can tell me where to go. We can bring a medic back here, or find a place to keep her that would be safe -"

"No," Qui-Gon said, shaking his head. "She must be brought back to the Temple. We can do no more here, Padawan. We will leave tomorrow."

"Part of our mission was to try to stabilize the planet, if we could," Obi-Wan insisted. "We haven't done that. But we *can* if we stay!"

"We have not been asked -"

"We have been asked, by the Young!" Obi-Wan exclaimed.

"That is not an official request," Qui-Gon replied testily. The boy was beginning to try his patience.

"You have broken the rules before, Qui-Gon," Obi-Wan argued. "Back on Gala, you left me to travel to the hill country

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when you were instructed to stay at the palace. You break the rules when it suits you to do so."

Qui-Gon took a deep breath, trying to control his temper. He would not match Obi-Wan's anger with his own. "I break the rules not because it suits me, but because sometimes during a mission the rules get in the way," he said carefully. "That is not the case here. I believe Yoda is right."

"But-" Obi-Wan interrupted, but Qui-Gon held up a hand.

"Tomorrow we will leave, Padawan," he said firmly.

Suddenly, a roar rose from the Young, who were gathered in the far corner of the vault. Cerasi ran over to the Jedi, her face beaming.

"It is official!" she cried. "In the absence of a response to our request for peace, we have issued a declaration of war on the Elders. If they do not agree immediately to Melida/Daan peace negotiations, we will attack them with their own weapons. They must respond to us now." She turned shining eyes to Obi-Wan. "This is the last push we must do to change the history of Melida/Daan. We need your help more than ever!"

Chapter Fourteen

Choked with anger and frustration, Obi-Wan could not answer Cerasi.

It was Qui-Gon who said gently, "I'm sorry, Cerasi. We must leave tomorrow."

Obi-Wan didn't wait to see Cerasi's reaction. He could only turn away, sick at heart. He had let her down.

It was no use. He couldn't change Qui-Gon's mind. Silently, Obi-Wan helped him minister to Tahl. They prepared and fed her broth and tea. Cerasi had brought Qui-Gon a medpac, and he was able to treat some of Tahl's wounds. Already, she seemed stronger. She would be ready to travel by tomorrow, Obi-Wan knew. The Jedi powers of recuperation were remarkable.

As soon as Tahl was settled, Obi-Wan sat against the wall and tried to calm his raging heart. Something was happening to him that he didn't understand. He felt as though there were two parts of him: a Jedi, and a person called Obi-Wan. Always before, he could not separate being a Jedi from being himself.

He had not been a Jedi with Nield and Cerasi. He had been one of them. He had not needed the Force to feel connected to something larger than himself.

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Now Qui-Gon was asking him to leave his friends just as they needed him. He had pledged to help them, had battled alongside them, and now he had to go, just because an elder told him so.

Loyalty had seemed such an easy concept back at the Temple. He had thought that he would be the best Padawan it was possible to be. He would meld his mind and body with his Master, and serve.

But he did not want to serve like this. Obi-Wan closed his eyes as his frustration again boiled up inside him. He pressed his hands between his knees to calm their shaking. He felt frightened at what was happening to him. He couldn't go to Qui-Gon for counsel. He didn't believe in his Master's counsel any longer. Yet neither could he oppose it.

Across the room, Nield was just as agitated, prowling around the headquarters silently. Everyone was waiting for the Melida and Daan councils to respond to the declaration of war. The long evening shaded into night, and still no word came.

"They did not take us seriously," Nield said bitterly. "We must strike again, and strike hard enough to make them sit up and take notice."

Cerasi put her hand on his arm. "But not tonight. Everyone needs rest. Tomorrow we can plan."

Nield nodded. Cerasi lowered the glow rods until they were only faint spots of illumination against the dark walls, like distant stars in a black sky.

Qui-Gon rolled himself up in his cloak and went to sleep by Tahl's side in case she called for him in the night. Obi-Wan watched as the boys and girls around him settled into exhausted sleep. Over in the corner, he saw Cerasi and Nield huddled together, talking quietly.

I should be with them, Obi-Wan thought bitterly. He belonged with them, talking about strategy and plans. Instead he had to sit silently, passively, watching their dedication, their fire. Cerasi hadn't looked at him once during the long evening. Nield hadn't either. They were no doubt disappointed and angry.

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Hesitantly, Obi-Wan rose. Even if he left them tomorrow, they had to know that he had no choice. He walked softly among the sleeping children and approached them.

"I wanted to say good-bye now," he said. "We'll be leaving early tomorrow." He paused. "I'm sorry I can't stay to help you. I want to."

"We understand," Nield said in a clipped tone. "You must obey your elder."

"It's not obedience as much as respect," Obi-Wan explained. His words sounded lame, even to him.

"Ah," Cerasi said, nodding. "My trouble is, I never got this respect thing. My father told me what was right, and he was always wrong. What does it matter, he'd say, if thousands die, or millions die? The sky is still blue overhead, and our world still remains. The cause is what's important. And so your Jedi boss tells you what you must do, and you do it. Even though you know he's wrong. And that is called respect." She looked at Nield. "Maybe I've been living in the dark too long. But I just can't see that."

Obi-Wan stood awkwardly in front of them. He felt confused. The Jedi way had always shimmered clear as a fountain of pure water to him. But Cerasi had muddied the water, clouded it with doubt.

"I would help if I could," he said finally. "If there was something I knew I could do that would make a difference -"

Nield and Cerasi looked at each other, then back at him.

"What is it?" Obi-Wan asked.

"We do have a plan," Cerasi said.

Obi-Wan crouched down next to them. "Tell me."

Nield and Cerasi leaned closer, their foreheads almost touching Obi-Wan's.

"You know that there are deflection towers ringing the perimeter of the city," Cerasi whispered. "There are also towers around the Melida center. These towers control the particle shields, preventing entry, and separating Melida from Daan."

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"Yes, I've seen them," Obi-Wan said, nodding.

Nield leaned forward. "We've been in contact with the Young outside the city," he said. "I've sent a message to them telling them that we have succeeded in capturing the weapons of both Melida and Daan. There are several destroyed villages ringing the city. Many of the children live there, or in the countryside. Hundreds. Thousands, if we take in a wider area. They are all connected by a network. If we can destroy the particle shields, they will march on Zehava."

"And they have weapons, too," Cerasi added quietly. "We would have an army. Not only would the Elders be outnumbered, they would have nothing to fight with. We could win a war without one death - if we are careful, and the Elders are smart enough to surrender."

"It sounds like a good plan," Obi-Wan said. "But how are you going to knock out the deflection towers?"

"That's our problem," Nield said. "They can only be destroyed from the air. All we need is an air transport."

"We can't use floaters," Cerasi explained. "The deflection towers have defense systems. Floaters wouldn't be fast enough or agile enough. We need a starfighter."

Cerasi and Nield held Obi-Wan's gaze.

"We know you flew some sort of fast transport into Melida/Daan. Will you fly us on the mission?" Cerasi asked.

Obi-Wan's breath left him. Cerasi and Nield were asking a great deal. This would go beyond a Padawan's disobedience. It would defy Yoda himself.

Qui-Gon would be within his rights to send him back to the Temple. He would probably have to appear before the Jedi Council. And Qui-Gon would have the right to dismiss him as his Padawan.

"We can leave at dawn," Nield said. "The mission should only take an hour, maybe a little more. Then you can take Tahl back to Coruscant."

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"The destruction of the particle shield will actually make it easier for you to smuggle Tahl out of Zehava," Cerasi pointed out.

"But if the starfighter is damaged, it could mean she can't leave at all," Obi-Wan said. "It would doom our mission to failure, and perhaps make me responsible for Tahl's death."

Cerasi bit her lip. "It was wrong of me to mock you before," she said awkwardly, as if she were unused to apologies. "I know the Jedi code guides the way you live. And we know we are asking too much from you. If we weren't desperate, we wouldn't do it. You've done so much already for us."

"As you have done for us," Obi-Wan said. "We could not have rescued Tahl without you."

"It is our only chance for peace," Nield said. "Once the Elders see our numbers, they will have no choice but surrender."

Obi-Wan glanced over at Qui-Gon's sleeping form. He owed his Master so much. Qui-Gon had fought alongside him, even saved his life. They had a bond.

Yet he had a bond with Nield and Cerasi, too. The shortness of the time he'd known them made no difference. The current that ran between them was like nothing he'd ever experienced. And even though Cerasi apologized for mocking him, hadn't there been a germ of truth in her words? Was it right to obey when his heart told him it was wrong?

Cerasi's usual fierce green gaze had softened with compassion as she watched the struggle on his face. Nield met his gaze steadily, warmly. He, too, knew what they were asking Obi-Wan was a great sacrifice.

He would have to betray Qui-Gon, betray his life as a Jedi. For them. For their cause. They could ask this because they knew they were right.

Obi-Wan knew they were right, too. And he couldn't let them down. He could not make this decision as a Jedi. He would make it as a friend.

He took a deep breath. "I'll do it."

Chapter Fifteen

They sneaked out before dawn. Cerasi led them to the Outer Circle through the tunnels. Then they left Zehava the same way Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon had arrived -through the Hall of Evidence, back to the trap. This time, Nield had brought finely spun carbon rope, which he tossed up to the surface. A strong magnet adhered to the metal slide, and they were able to scale it easily.

The hike to the transport went quickly in the cool gray light. The three of them had stuffed proton grenades in their packs. They were heavy, but they hardly felt the weight. They were anxious to get to the transport and start their mission.

When they reached the starfighter, Nield and Cerasi helped Obi-Wan uncover it from the branches and brush he and Qui-Gon had dragged over it.

Nield beamed when he saw the sleek, small starfighter. Then he noticed the gash in the side panel. He turned to Obi-Wan.

"I guess I should have asked you something. Are you a good pilot?"

Obi-Wan looked at him blankly for a moment. Then Cerasi burst out laughing. Nield and Obi-Wan joined her, the sound bouncing off the canyon walls.

"I guess we'll find out," Cerasi said cheerfully.

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They climbed into the starfighter. Obi-Wan slid into the pilot's seat. For a moment, he hesitated, staring at the controls. The last time he'd sat here, he'd landed the craft with Qui-Gon in the copilot's seat. Qui-Gon had kidded him about denting the side of the starfighter. Obi-Wan felt a pang of remorse. Was he doing the right thing? Was this cause worth betraying Qui-Gon?

Cerasi touched his wrist gently. "We know this is hard for you, Obi-Wan. That's what makes your sacrifice even more valuable to us."

"And we give you our deepest thanks," Nield said quietly.

Obi-Wan turned and met their eyes. He felt a shock, as though he were looking at himself. In the steady gazes of his friends he saw what was held in his own heart - the same dedication, the same fierceness, the same daring. He felt his confidence surge. He *was* doing the right thing. Maybe Qui-Gon would come to understand that.

He started the ion engines. "Let's get going."

"We should hit the perimeter towers first, then the center towers," Cerasi said. "We're going to have to do everything by sight. I don't have any coordinates for the nav computer."

"It won't be a problem," Obi-Wan said. He kept the engines at low power as the ship rose in order to clear the overhanging cliff. Then he pushed the engines to full power to soar above the canyon. No one told him to slow down.

"I'm going to have to do some defensive flying, so it's better if you two do the aiming," Obi-Wan said. "The station for the laser cannon is right in front of you, Cerasi."

Nield went to his own laser cannon station.

"I'll open up the emergency weapon sighting plate as we get closer," Obi-Wan said. "Remember to keep your eyes out for speeders. We're going to have to come in low to blast the deflection controls."

The two deflection towers flanking the main gate came into sight in seconds. "Here we go," Obi-Wan said, gritting his teeth.

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"Floater on the right approaching," Cerasi rapped out. "We must have turned up on scanners."

Obi-Wan cut sharply to the left, then veered right again. Surprised to see a starfighter heading straight for it, the floater turned sharply downward, firing at the same time. Obi-Wan made a minute adjustment that caused the ship to turn and the missile to harmlessly fall to his left. It crashed outside the city walls, causing an explosion.

"They won't do that very often," Cerasi noted. "They could level a building once we get over the city."

"They'll probably use smaller firepower," Nield agreed.

"We have to do this without blasting them out of the sky," Cerasi said worriedly. "We have to show them that our ultimate goal is peace."

"That's my job," Obi-Wan said. "The tower is in range. Let's blast it."

Another floater approached from the left, and he could see others taking to the air like a flock of insects, probably from the Daan military headquarters in the distance. Obi-Wan calculated the slower speed of the floaters. He had to stay level long enough for Cerasi and Nield to aim. He should have just enough time...

He opened the firing panel for Nield. Bracing himself against the hull of the starfighter, Nield aimed his laser cannon. Cerasi waited, her fingers on her own control stick.

"Now!" Obi-Wan shouted, zooming closer to the deflection tower.

Cerasi and Nield fired the cannons. As soon as the projectiles were away, Obi-Wan pushed the engines to full power and climbed above the floater heading for his left flank. Blaster fire followed him. He took a small hit on his wing, but not enough to damage the craft.

Both Cerasi and Nield scored a direct hit on the tower. Obi-Wan felt the vibration of the blast ripple against the starfighter's hull. The floater rocked as it rode the wind vibrations, the driver

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struggling to retain control. The particle shield was briefly visible, then fractured in a shower of blue-tinged energy atoms.

Obi-Wan, Cerasi, and Nield cheered, even as Obi-Wan circled around to hit the next tower. Now the military floaters were almost on him.

"Seven floaters," Cerasi said, counting. Her face creased in worry. "Can we do this, Obi-Wan?"

"If we do it fast. Can you aim upside down?" Obi-Wan asked, hovering out of the floater's range.

Cerasi grinned. "No problem."

Nield positioned his laser cannon. "Do it."

Obi-Wan pushed the engines. The starfighter rocketed down through the sky at full speed. He knew that technically he was going too fast for this altitude, but he also knew he could handle the craft. And there was no one in the copilot's seat to remind him of star aviation rules, or warn him of the dangers. Exhilaration raced through him. For the first time in his life, he had no one to answer to. There were no Jedi rules or superior wisdom aboard this ship.

He zigzagged on the descent, pushing the ship as much as he dared. The floaters hung back and fired, afraid of colliding with the star-ship. Using the Force as a guide, Obi-Wan was able to avoid the worst fire.

As he got closer, the speeders grew more daring. One came at him dead-on, firing as it went.

"Ready-" Obi-Wan shouted.

At the last moment, he flipped the starfighter over and dived under the floater, maneuvering the craft so that it had a clear shot at the tower.

Nield and Cerasi fired. The deflection tower blew, scattering metal and parts. Obi-Wan flipped the starfighter right-side up and climbed at top speed. The floaters frantically dived to avoid getting hit.

"Everyone okay?" Obi-Wan asked.

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"Dizzy, but okay," Cerasi said, wiping sweat off her forehead. "That was incredible flying."

"Okay, follow the wall," Nield directed. "We'll hit the towers one by one around the perimeter."

The military floaters pursued them, but they could not fly as high or go as fast as a star-fighter. More floaters joined the chase as they flew. To hit each deflection tower, Obi-Wan had to practice the same too-fast maneuvering to avoid being blasted by the speeders or colliding with them. Their advantage was the speed and agility of the starfighter and the incredible accuracy of Cerasi and Nield.

One by one, they destroyed each tower, the speeders hard on their flank. The speeders tried to capture Obi-Wan in a pincer movement, but he was too quick for them.

When they saw the last tower go up, the three let out a whoop of exultation. Cerasi leaned over and hugged Obi-Wan. Nield pounded him on the back.

"I knew we could count on you, friend," he said joyfully. He checked his laser cannon. "We have plenty of firepower left. What do you say we blow the Halls of Evidence into nanospecs?"

Cerasi frowned. "Now? But Nield, we need to get back. We have to hit both Melida and Daan for peace negotiations while they're weak."

"And besides, there could be people inside," Obi-Wan pointed out.

Cerasi looked at Nield. "We said we would do this without taking a life."

Nield bit his lip as he glanced out the spaceport down to the surface of Zehava. "The sooner those halls of hate are blown up, the sooner everyone on this planet can breathe again," he murmured. "I despise everything they stand for."

"I know," Cerasi said. "So do I. But let's take one step at a time."

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"All right," Nield agreed reluctantly. "But let's do one last thing. Before we land, let's do a quick loop over the countryside. Deila was waiting to pass the message that the perimeter shields had been blown. The Scavenger Young should be mobilizing."

Obi-Wan flew in widening circles over the countryside. Everywhere they saw young people, boys and girls, streaming out from farms and villages and woods. They were already beginning to clog the road into Zehava. Some rode on battered landspeeders or souped-up turbo-tractors. Those who walked formed columns, marching in military style. When they saw the starfighter overhead, they waved and shouted greetings the three could not hear. Obi-Wan dipped his wings in a return salute.

Tears stood in Cerasi's eyes. "I will never forget this day," she said. "And I will never forget what you did for us, Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Obi-Wan turned the starfighter back toward the landing area. He didn't care how angry Qui-Gon was, or if he got sent back to the Temple. This moment was worth it.

Chapter Sixteen

Qui-Gon had woken early and checked on Tahl. She was sleeping deeply. That was good. Sleep was the best healer until he could get her to Coruscant.

He saw that Obi-Wan had disappeared, along with Nield and Cerasi. No doubt he wanted a last outing with his friends before he left. Qui-Gon would let it pass. He knew it was hard for the boy to leave them.

And he had a plan of his own.

He had asked a quiet girl named Roenni to watch over Tahl. Then he'd traveled through the tunnels to the route he had mapped out last night, slipping away while the rest of the Young were celebrating their victory.

When he emerged above ground in the abandoned neighborhood at the border of Melida and Daan territory, it was still dark. A few stars still twinkled in a navy sky that shaded to gray at the horizon.

Qui-Gon had waited in the alley until he was sure all the people he'd invited had arrived. Then he walked to the partially bombed out building on the corner.

Last night he'd sent a note to Wehutti by one of the Young messengers. He had asked for a meeting between the Melida Council and the Daan Council. He had suggested that it was in

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their best interest to attend. He had news of the Young that they must know.

Until now, he hadn't been sure if anyone would show up. He still wasn't sure if one side or the other would try to capture him. It was a desperate gamble. He was prepared for anything. But he had to make a last try for peace before he left Melida/Daan. He had seen the heartbreak on Obi-Wan's face. He would do it for his Padawan.

Near a broken window, he paused to listen for a moment.

"And where is the Jedi?" a voice asked coldly. "If this is another dirty Melida trick, I swear by the honored memory of our martyrs that we will retaliate."

"A dirty *Daan* trick, more likely." Qui-Gon recognized Wehutti's voice. "For it's a coward's trick, worthy of your worthless ancestors, to lure your enemy to a meeting under false pretenses. Our troops can be here in seconds."

"And what will they do? Throw pebbles?" The other voice was amused. "Didn't the Melida blow up their own weapons stores, fearing the attacking Daan?"

"And didn't the Daan allow their own stores to be stolen right under their noses?" Wehutti snapped.

Qui-Gon knew it was time for him to enter. He climbed over a half-demolished wall. The Melida council members stood on one side of the room, heavily armed and dressed in plastoid armor. The Daan stood on the opposite side, almost identically dressed and armed. Each member of each group bore scars and signs of healed wounds. Several were missing limbs, or breathed through breath masks. It was hard to tell the two ravaged groups apart.

"No tricks, no stratagems," Qui-Gon said, striding to the middle of the room. "And if Melida and Daan will cooperate, I won't take up too much time, either."

The Daan council members looked as skeptical as the Melida, Qui-Gon thought as he surveyed the room. At least the two groups had something in common: distrust.

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"What news of the Young have you brought us?" Wehutti asked impatiently.

"And why should we care what children do?" an elder Daan asked contemptuously.

"Because yesterday they made you look like fools," Qui-Gon answered mildly. He waited out the indrawn breaths and looks of avid hatred directed his way. "And, on a more practical note, they have stolen most of your weapons," he added. "They have asked for disarmament, and you have ignored them. Obviously, they are quite capable of getting what they want."

"All we have to do is walk in and take back our weapons," the Daan leader said, rasping through a breath mask. "Candy from a baby."

"I warn you," Qui-Gon said, turning to catch the eye of everyone in the room. "Do not underestimate the Young. They have learned how to fight from you. They have learned determination from you. And they have their own ideas."

"Is this what you brought us here to hear?" the Daan leader growled. "If so, I have heard enough."

"For once, I agree with Gueni," Wehutti said, referring to the Daan in the breath mask. "This is a waste of time."

"I must urge you to reconsider," Qui-Gon said. "If you form a coalition government, you might be able to take control of Zehava, and thus of Melida/Daan. If not, the Young will win this war. They will end up ruling their elders. And though their aims are pure, I fear for the cost that will bring."

Wehutti started from the room, followed by the Melida leaders. "Join with the Daan? You're dreaming!"

Quickly, Gueni followed suit, as though he did not want the Melida to be the first to leave. The other Daan followed on his heels. "Unthinkable!"

Suddenly, the sound of an explosion caused the remaining windows to vibrate. The Daan and Melida looked at each other.

"This is a trick!" Wehutti roared. "The foul Daan are attacking us!"

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"The detestable Melida are attacking!" Gueni cried at the same time. "Fiends!"

Qui-Gon strode to the window. He looked out, but could see nothing. As he scanned the area, another explosion ripped through the silence. It had come from the Daan sector, he calculated. But what could it have been?

In the next second, Gueni's comlink began to beep. The Elder Daan hurried to a corner to take the message in private. While Gueni listened, his back to the room, Qui-Gon began to worry. Obi-Wan had disappeared that morning. He hoped his Padawan wasn't involved in whatever was going on. Using the Force, he tried to establish a connection with Obi-Wan. But he could feel nothing. No distress, no confusion, no assurance. Only... a void.

When Gueni turned back to the group, he looked shaken. "Reports have come in that two deflection towers have been blown in the Daan sector."

One of the Daan warriors went for his weapon. "I knew it! The filthy Melida-"

"No!" Gueni cried hoarsely. "It was the Young."

Slowly, the Daan's hand fell to his side. The Melida who had begun to reach for his weapon stopped as well. A babble of conversation rose.

"Those children could not do it on their own! The deplorable Melida are behind this!" one of the Daan council members shouted.

"The lying Daan are always quick to accuse without facts!" a Melida roared back.

Qui-Gon leaned against the sill and waited out the argument. Sometimes, it was better to sit back and wait for events to unfold.

Comlinks began to beep. Melida and Daan alike spoke into them, their faces registering shock. Reports flooded in from both sides. One by one, the deflection towers went down. First on the perimeter, then in the center. The explosions got closer as the last towers were blown.

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"The Young are pouring in from the countryside," Gueni reported, a look of amazement on his face. "The city is now open. Defenseless. And they are armed."

Melida and Daan faced each other. Now they knew the threat that faced them was serious.

"Do you see now that you must join together?" Qui-Gon asked quietly. "The Young only want peace. You can give it to them. Don't you want to rebuild your city?"

"They say they want peace, but they wage war," Wehutti said contemptuously. "Well, we can give them a war to make our ancestors proud. We may have lost some weapons, but we are not defenseless."

"And we have weapons remaining as well," a Daan said quickly. "Shipments are arriving this very afternoon from our stores outside the city."

"They will collapse at any sign of resistance," a Melida woman chimed in. "We can fight them."

"But not together," Wehutti said. "The glorious Melida can defeat them without Daan help."

"For once, do not overestimate yourselves!" Qui-Gon spoke sharply. "You don't have weapons. You don't have air support. You have an army made of Elders and the wounded. Think of what you're saying. There are thousands of them!"

Both sides of the room grew silent. Wehutti and Gueni exchanged a glance. Qui-Gon glimpsed surrender underneath the sizzling distrust.

"Perhaps the Jedi is right," Gueni said reluctantly. "I see only one way to defeat them. We must join our armies and weapons. But the Jedi must lead us."

Wehutti nodded slowly. "It's the only way we can be sure that the Daan will not turn on us once the battle is won."

"It is our only assurance also," Gueni said. "We cannot trust the word of the Melida."

Qui-Gon shook his head. "I did not come here to lead you into battle. I came here to urge you to find a way toward peace."

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"But there is no peace!" Wehutti cried. "The Young have drawn the battle lines!"

"These are your children!" Qui-Gon cried out. He had lost his patience in the face of the cruel obstinacy of both sides. He controlled his voice and went on. "I, for one, will not kill children. Why are you so willing to do so?" He turned to Wehutti. "What about Cerasi? Are you willing to march into battle against your own daughter?"

Wehutti paled. His clenched fist uncurled.

"My grandson Rica is underground," Gueni said.

"I have not seen my Deila in two years," a woman Melida said quietly.

Other Daan and Melida looked uncertain. There was a long pause.

"All right," Wehutti said at last. "If you will be our emissary, we will open talks with the Young."

Gueni nodded. "The Daan agree. You are right, Qui-Gon. We cannot wage war against our children."

Chapter Seventeen

"We will not meet with them," Nield told Qui-Gon furiously. "I know what their promises are worth. They agree to meet as a diversion. They will tell us we must disarm. And then the fighting will begin again. This surrender is too soon. If we relent, they'll think we're weak."

"They know you have backed them into a corner," Qui-Gon argued. "They're willing to talk. You succeeded, Nield. Now take your victory."

Cerasi crossed her arms. "We did not succeed by being fools, Qui-Gon."

Qui-Gon turned away with a sigh. He had been arguing with Cerasi and Nield since he'd returned. It had done no good. It was out of his hands, anyway.

Obi-Wan sat at the makeshift table, watching. He hadn't offered an opinion, or tried to sway Cerasi or Nield. Qui-Gon had noted this with surprise. Obi-Wan had wanted peace on this planet. Why did he stand back now? Once again, when Qui-Gon tried to connect with his Padawan, he found a void.

Headquarters was now crowded with the boys and girls who had arrived from the country. More congregated aboveground, gathered in parks and squares. The Young had mobilized, bringing whatever food they had and instituting a supply line. It

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would take all day to get everyone fed, but they were determined to succeed.

"How did you blow the deflection towers?" Qui-Gon asked Nield and Cerasi curiously. It was a question that had been bothering him since he'd heard the news. "You'd have to hit them from the air. But floaters couldn't do that job. You'd need..."

Qui-Gon paused. He turned to face Obi-Wan. Slowly, Obi-Wan pushed his chair back. Qui-Gon heard it scrape against the stone floor. Then he stood. He did not fidget or look away. He met Qui-Gon's gaze.

"So it was you," Qui-Gon said. "You took the starfighter. You took it knowing it was our only way off the planet. You took it knowing it was the only hope for Tahl."

Obi-Wan nodded.

Cerasi and Nield glanced from one Jedi to the other. Cerasi began to speak, but thought better of it. The tension between Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan was private.

"Please come with me, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said curtly.

He led the way to an adjacent tunnel where they could talk privately. He waited a few moments to compose himself. Bitterness had no place here. Yet he felt it surge within him. Obi-Wan had broken his trust.

He did not know what to say. His emotions swamped him. Qui-Gon recalled his Temple training with an effort. He would admonish his Padawan according to Jedi rules. First, he would describe the offense. It was the duty of the Master to do so without judgment.

Grateful for a guide, Qui-Gon took a deep breath. "You were instructed not to take sides."

"Yes," Obi-Wan responded calmly. It was the duty of a Padawan to agree to his fault without argument.

"You were instructed to be available to leave at any time," he said.

"Yes," Obi-Wan replied.

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"You were instructed that Tahl's health was your first concern. Yet you endangered that health by taking our only form of transport on a dangerous mission."

"Yes," Obi-Wan agreed.

Qui-Gon swallowed painfully. "By doing all this, you not only put Tahl at risk, but the peace process on Melida/Daan as well."

Obi-Wan hesitated for the first time. "I aided the peace process--"

"That is your interpretation," Qui-Gon interrupted. "It was not your instruction. Your Master and Jedi Master Yoda had decided that Jedi intervention at this stage could only prejudice either the Melida or Daan, thereby sabotaging the peace process. You were told this. Is that true, Obi-Wan?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan admitted. "It is true."

Qui-Gon paused. He gathered himself to deliver the Jedi wisdom of the Master and Padawan relationship. How the rules had evolved over thousands of years. How the Padawan's pledge of obedience had nothing to do with power, but everything to do with the gaining of wisdom and the humility of service. How he was not here to punish Obi-Wan, or even to teach him, but to aid Obi-Wan's own journey and enlightenment until the day he grew to become a Jedi Knight.

"I don't care," Obi-Wan said, breaking into his thoughts.

"You don't care about what?" Qui-Gon asked, startled. Usually, a Padawan was silent after his admission, waiting for the Master to decide on their next step.

"I don't care that I broke the rules," Obi-Wan said. "It was right to break them."

Qui-Gon took a breath. "And was it right to break my trust?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "I'm sorry I had to. But yes."

Qui-Gon felt Obi-Wan's words enter him like a blade. He saw in a flash that since he had taken Obi-Wan as his apprentice, he had been waiting for this moment. Waiting for the betrayal. The strike. He had hardened his heart, preparing himself for it.

And yet he was not prepared at all.

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"Qui-Gon, you must understand," Obi-Wan said quietly. "I've found something here. All my life, I have been told what is right, what is best. The path has been pointed out to me. That was a great gift, and I'm grateful for all I've learned. But here on this world all those abstractions I've learned suddenly fit into something concrete. Something I can see. Something real." Obi-Wan gestured back toward the headquarters of the Young. "These people feel like my people. This cause feels like my cause. It calls to me like nothing I've ever felt before."

Qui-Gon's astonishment turned to grief and anger at himself. Obi-Wan had been swept away. He should have stepped in earlier. He should have remembered that Obi-Wan was just a boy.

He chose his words with care. "The situation here is heartbreaking, yes. It is a hard one to walk away from. That's why I tried to resolve it before we left. But walk away we must, Padawan."

Obi-Wan's face turned stony.

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said gently. "Everything you think you found here you already have. You are a Jedi. What you need is distance and a little time for reflection."

"I don't need to reflect," Obi-Wan said stiffly.

"That is your choice," Qui-Gon said. "But still, you must accompany me back to the Temple. I need to gather some things for Tahl in the city. When I return, I expect to find you packed and ready to go."

He started back to the main tunnel. Obi-Wan did not move.

"Come, Padawan," he said.

Reluctantly, Obi-Wan trailed behind him. Qui-Gon felt worry fill him. There was something closed in Obi-Wan, something unmoveable, that he had never sensed in his apprentice before. It would be good to return to the Temple, where the wisdom of Yoda and the calm surroundings could help Obi-Wan find his center again.

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Qui-Gon heard a roar from the main tunnel, voices shouting, pounding feet on stone. He quickened his pace and burst into the space, Obi-Wan at his heels.

Nield spun around to face them. "The offer for negotiation was a trick. The Elders have attacked!"

Chapter Eighteen

Chaos reigned in the tunnels. The passageways were choked with bodies, children desperately trying to escape the battle raging above. Some were wounded. Others hurriedly tried to arm themselves for the counterattack. Hundreds of the Young were trapped above in open parks and squares. They needed reinforcements.

"We need medics and a supply line for weapons," Cerasi said.

"We need to strike back hard!" Nield cried.

Obi-Wan rushed to huddle with Cerasi and Nield. Qui-Gon saw anguish on all three faces. It was right that his Padawan help while he could.

But they had to get Tahl off-planet immediately. Now it was imperative.

Qui-Gon hurried to her side. She was sitting up, listening intently to what was going on around her. He crouched by her side. "I had hoped to go back to the city to find more med supplies and borrow a floater, but I'm afraid that's impossible now. War has broken out, and we must leave immediately."

She nodded. "It's all right. I can walk, Qui-Gon. Your medicine has already helped me. I can make it, if you guide me."

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Qui-Gon bent to gather up their things. They had lost their survival packs, but he had gathered supplies over the past few days. He stashed them in a pack Cerasi had given him.

When he turned to search for Obi-Wan, the boy was gone.

Cerasi and Nield were gone as well. Qui-Gon dropped the pack and searched the adjoining tunnels. He went as far as he could, but he was wasting time. Obi-Wan had probably gone to the surface with Cerasi and Nield.

Perhaps he thought that Qui-Gon still needed to gather more supplies, as he had told Obi-Wan. In that case, Obi-Wan might be planning to meet him at the starfighter. The boy had disobeyed him again, but Qui-Gon felt sure Obi-Wan would appear at the starfighter.

In any case, he couldn't waste any more time. He gathered his pack, helped Tahl to rise, and started through the tunnels to the edge of Zehava.

The smell of smoke and the sound of cries were in the air as Obi-Wan, Cerasi, and Nield climbed above ground. They crouched behind a wall for shelter. Starfighters circled overhead, strafing the park where the Young had gathered. Children ran for cover, or tried to shoot down the ships with shoulder-mounted torpedo launchers. The Starfighters were able to stay out of range.

"They're wasting ammunition!" Nield cried.

"They must have flown in the starfighters from another base," Cerasi said. "Or maybe they'd hidden them somewhere we didn't know about. We can't fight them from the ground!"

Obi-Wan gripped the wall. A starfighter came in low. He saw rapid flashes from the forward gun pod. Blaster fire ripped into the grass. A young girl sprang for cover. Another boy wasn't so lucky. The fire hit him in the leg, and he fell. Before Obi-Wan could move, the boy's companion dragged him to safety. Anguish ripped through Obi-Wan. The children were helpless!

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Cerasi squeezed her eyes shut, as though she couldn't bear to see any more. "We have to stop this," she said numbly.

"There's only three Starfighters," Obi-Wan said tensely, scanning the sky above.

"That's enough," Nield said grimly. "We've got to get organized. They're going to drive half of us out of the city if we don't do something!"

Nield turned to Obi-Wan. "We need your starship again, my friend. We have to fight them in the air. With your skills, we can shoot them down, just like we hit those deflection towers."

Stricken, Obi-Wan gazed at his friends. "You said you would not ask me to go against Qui-Gon's orders again."

"But everything's changed, Obi-Wan," Cerasi pleaded. "Look around you. Children are dying. We'll lose everything if we can't fight them from the air." Tears ran down Cerasi's cheeks. "Please."

Obi-Wan's ears rang with the cries of the terrified children. Even though he was safe behind the wall, he felt as though blaster fire had ripped through his body. He had been torn in two. Everything he'd known, everything he'd thought was important had been shattered. His Jedi training lay in pieces at his feet. It meant nothing compared to what was going on around him now.

He flinched as a proton torpedo exploded. Dirt sprayed into the air, raining down on their heads.

"Obi-Wan!" Nield shouted. "You must choose!"

Tears snaked down through the grime on Cerasi's face. She didn't speak. Her shoulders shook as a child screamed in pain.

Obi-Wan realized he had already chosen. He couldn't turn his back on this suffering. He couldn't turn his back on his friends. Even if it cost him everything. He would give that, and more.

"I'll be back," Obi-Wan promised, and took off.

Chapter Nineteen

Obi-Wan ran without stopping. He had to get to the ship before Qui-Gon. He did not want a confrontation. If Qui-Gon tried to stop him, what would he do? He pushed aside the thought. He would just have to get there first. Tahl would slow Qui-Gon down.

But he had underestimated the determination and speed of two Jedi Knights. As he ran down the canyon path, Obi-Wan saw Qui-Gon lifting off the last of the camouflaging branches. Tahl must already be aboard.

His steps slowed as Qui-Gon caught sight of him. Obi-Wan saw the relief on his Master's face. Qui-Gon thought he was coming to return with him to the Temple. The Jedi Knight stood by the entrance ramp, waiting.

Obi-Wan didn't give Qui-Gon a chance to speak. He could not bear to hear words of welcome.

"I'm not here to go with you," he said. "I came for the starfighter."

Qui-Gon's look of quiet welcome faded. His features froze into a mask. "Tahl is aboard," Qui-Gon said. "I am taking her to Coruscant."

"I'll bring the ship back," Obi-Wan tried. "I need it now. If you could wait here -"

Jude Watson

"No," Qui-Gon said angrily. "No, Padawan. I will not make your betrayal easy for you. If you try to take this step, know what a hard one it is."

Neither had moved a muscle. Yet Obi-Wan knew that Qui-Gon was just as prepared as he was to fight. The Force swirled around him, but it was a disturbed Force, neither dark nor light. He tried to tap into it and could not. It was like trying to squeeze a handful of fine sand as it streamed out through the cracks in his fingers.

He had no choice. The world around him was dying. He had to save it. He had to fight Qui-Gon.

Obi-Wan went for his lightsaber. Qui-Gon moved only a fraction of an instant later. Because of his quickness, his lightsaber activated at the same time as Obi-Wan's.

Qui-Gon's green beam shot up, glowing in the gray light. Obi-Wan felt his own lightsaber pulse in his hand. Qui-Gon kept his eyes on Obi-Wan.

Here was the moment. He had only to step forward and challenge his Master. He had only to move one muscle for it to be taken as an offensive move. Then the battle would begin. Obi-Wan met Qui-Gon's gaze and saw the same anguish he felt. He felt something within him crack, and his resolve slowly drained away. He could not do this.

Simultaneously, they both lowered their weapons. The lightsabers deactivated with a faint buzzing sound. For a moment, all Obi-Wan heard was the lonesome wind, howling through the canyon.

"You must choose, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon told him quietly. "You can go with me now, or stay. Know that if you stay, you are no longer a Jedi."

No longer a Jedi. Was he prepared to take that step? Is this what he had come to?

The moment spun out, became timeless to Obi-Wan. Time meant nothing. The confrontation with the man he had pledged

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to study under, learn from, defend and support suddenly felt unreal. How did he get here? What was he doing?

But through his confusion he saw Cerasi's fierce glowing eyes, heard Nield's fervent words. He still smelled the smoke of battle, heard the desperate cries. He saw barricaded streets and Elders too blind with hatred to notice that they were killing their planet, piece by bloody piece. He saw them killing their own children.

He could tell Qui-Gon about the battle he had seen. He could try. But he had tried before. Qui-Gon was right. He must make his choice.

Obi-Wan grasped the rock of his conviction and felt his confusion drop away. Here on Melida/Daan he had met a reality that was stronger than anything he'd known.

"I have found something here more important than the Jedi code," Obi-Wan said slowly. "Something not only worth fighting for, but worth dying for."

Obi-Wan handed his lightsaber to Qui-Gon. "You may go, Qui-Gon Jinn. But I will stay."

It was as though the words hit Qui-Gon in the face, for he flinched. He stared down at Obi-Wan's lightsaber in his hand, not speaking. A great struggle seem to go on within the Jedi Knight's powerful body.

Obi-Wan had hurt him. He longed to take the words back. He could not. They had been said. He had meant them.

Qui-Gon did not look at him. He did not say a word. He turned and strode up the ramp, into the starfighter.

Obi-Wan stood back as the engines powered up. The starfighter rose cleanly from the canyon and shot off into the upper atmosphere. He stood watching until it was out of sight. Then Obi-Wan turned his back. He hurried down the path, back to Zehava and his new life.

Cerasi and Nield were waiting.

End of Volume One
Continued In Volume Two

About the Author

John David Wolverton (born 30 May 1957), better known by his pen names Dave Wolverton and David Farland is an American author, editor, and instructor of online writing workshops, and groups. He writes in several genres but is known best for his science fiction and fantasy works. His Runelords series have hit the New York Times bestsellers list. In 1987 he won the Writers of the Future contest, and has been nominated for a Nebula Award and a Hugo Award. He lives in St. George, Utah with his wife and five children and is best known for his novels, editing and online writing courses.

About the Author

JUDE WATSON is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the Jedi Quest and Jedi Apprentice series, as well as the Star Wars Journals *Darth Maul*, *Queen Amidala*, and *Princess Leia: Captive to Evil*. She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest.

About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.